

EMILY EK  
MURDOCH

ALWAYS  
THE  
WIDOW



# **Always the Widow**

**Never the Bride  
Book 9**

Emily E K Murdoch



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## Chapter One

Try as she might, Elizabeth Howard could not stop from shaking as she entered Lenskeyn House. The memories...they were painful. Five years had passed since she entered this house as a new bride, but the remembrance of that day seared her mind.

It was almost as though she had traveled back in time. Today, as that day had been, the house was decorated for a wedding.

She had been so happy, arriving on the arm of her new husband—Lord Elmore Howard, younger brother of the Earl of Lenskeyn. She had been so proud, so honored to be chosen.

Before she had known his true nature.

Elizabeth shivered as she passed the threshold into the great hall, which was packed with society's peers. None noticed her nervous entrance, her black mourning gown simple and unadorned. They were too busy laughing with the happy couple: Albemarle Howard, the Earl of Lenskeyn, and Miss Theodosia Ashbrooke—the Countess of Lenskeyn as she was now. Elizabeth watched them greet guests and swallowed down her pain.

Coming back to this place had been a mistake. Too many of her nightmares were here...and now Elmore was dead four weeks. It was almost a pretty house, really.

*If only she could forget the man she had married.*

*He is gone*, she told herself silently as she moved to the edge of the room to avoid notice. She was free.

*Almost.* Just one last duty to perform, and then she could leave the Howard family behind and mourn quietly at home.

"Congratulations!"

Another gentleman approached the happy couple with a hearty handshake for her brother-in-law. Elizabeth watched the bride and groom as they beamed at their guests, never once leaving each other's sides.

A wistful smile crept over her face, despite her nerves. Albemarle and Theodosia looked far happier than she had ever felt in her five years

of marriage. It was a mystery how others managed to find someone so compatible with them.

Her smile faded. But then, she had thought Elmore perfect when she had first married him.

The wooden box in her hands grew heavier as her thoughts turned dark, but it was nothing to the weight of her heart.

*A wedding, Elizabeth thought wryly. It should be the happiest place in the world. Was it widows who were bad luck at a wedding or babies?*

*Not that she could have brought the latter,* she thought darkly. Five years of marriage and no child. It was cruel, the hand Fate had dealt her.

But now, she was almost free of the Howard family, free of her clinging, irritating mother-in-law, free of the brother-in-law who had never paid her any attention, and free of the new sister-in-law who would undoubtedly be more of the same.

She shifted the wooden box in her arms, and guilt seared through her heart once more. Elizabeth pushed it aside firmly. *She had done what she had needed to do.* She just had to get it over with, and then she could leave.

But despite her best intentions, it was another twenty minutes or so before Albemarle and Theodosia were unencumbered with guests. Elizabeth watched them, her curiosity growing as she observed more of them.

Albemarle, the elder brother, had lived abroad for the entirety of her foolish marriage to Elmore. He had not even returned for their wedding, something his mother, the dowager countess, had taken as a personal insult.

Elizabeth had hardly cared. She had been so focused on Elmore, she had barely noticed who else was at their wedding.

As though her thoughts could attract his attention, Albemarle turned and spotted her. Muttering something to his new bride, the pair of them started to approach her.

Elizabeth swallowed. She knew Theodosia, of course, had even had her over to tea a week or so ago with some other ladies of the *ton*—but it had been a mere formality. They were not intimate.

Why, only a week ago, she had been society's matchmaker, and now she was a countess and her sister-in-law.

Theodosia was a witty woman. She would realize the truth. She would announce it to the world, here, at Lenskeyn House, and Elizabeth would be ruined.



“Lady Howard,” Albemarle said in a quiet voice.

Elizabeth tried her best to smile. “Congratulations on your marriage, your lordship, Lady Howard.”

“We are honored that you came,” said Theodosia in a low voice like her husband.

Elizabeth nodded. *The sooner she got these words out, the sooner this would all be over.* “I wanted to. And I also wanted to...to give you this.”

The damned wooden box, the secret she had been carrying for years, had never felt so heavy, but she managed to place it into Theodosia’s hands. There. It was done. It was gone, and she would never have to look at the damned thing again.

Theodosia looked curious and lifted up the lid. The sunlight pouring into the great hall hit the pile of jewels within the box: diamonds, emeralds, pearls, the Lenskeyn brooch...

Theodosia gasped and looked at her husband, but he had not taken his eyes from Elizabeth.

“The Lenskeyn family jewels,” he said with a knowing smile.

It was now, Elizabeth knew that she could be unmasked—but all she had to do was stay calm. If she acted as though this was all normal, with no hidden secret, then they would never suspect.

If only her heart would listen to reason. It was fluttering frantically, sure they would notice what was wrong.

She nodded as calmly as she could. “They are yours now. They belong, rightfully, to the Countess of Lenskeyn.”

“But they are yours by right,” Albemarle said reasonably. “My brother Elmore gave them to you, and you should keep them.”

His wife agreed. Shutting the lid firmly, she tried to place the box back into Elizabeth’s hands, but she would have none of it. The damned things were gone, and she would never accept them back. They told too many sorry tales of lies and deceit for her to be happy to have them back.

Remnants of Elmore’s gambling and money lending, she would never touch them again. Perhaps Theodosia, without knowing their true history, would be able to enjoy them.

“I would really rather you keep them,” Elizabeth said, trying not to sound too forceful. “Elmore died over a month ago, and...well. They belong to your family. I was only borrowing them, really.”

Squeezing Theodosia’s arm in what she hoped would be considered sisterly affection, Elizabeth forced her feet away from the happy couple.

Behind her, she heard a footmen mutter, “May I take that for you,

your ladyship?"

"What—oh, yes. Please put them in a safe place, and I will consider what to do with them later," came Theodosia's voice. "Albie, we should have Lady Howard—Elizabeth, isn't it? We should have Elizabeth stay with us."

Elizabeth colored. She did not want their pitying remarks, hated their discomfort at her own loss. *Loss? Elmore's death was no loss.*

"Family is important," she heard Albemarle reply. "We should not let her be on her own, not at the moment."

Elizabeth almost laughed as she entered the drawing room. *Alone?* She had been alone these five years, and her heart hardened as she thought back to all she had done. After her actions, she did not deserve the pity of the Howards. They saw her as an object of misery because she was a widow, but what had she done as a Howard? Betrayed their trust, betrayed the whole family.

They would never know, naturally, but she did. She would have to live with what she had done for the rest of her life. *As long as the dowager countess never found out...*

The room was heaving with society's finest, all laughing and drinking, toasting the happy couple and teasing young ladies about when it would be their time.

There was no place for her here. Elizabeth walked slowly around the edge of the room, and anyone she looked at turned away. She would have taken it amiss if she had not been wearing widow's weeds.

*No one likes to talk to the widow at a wedding.*

Elizabeth's stomach swooped painfully, and a wave of nausea washed over her. She steadied herself by placing a hand on the wall and looked around for a seat, but all were taken.

Her guilt only increased. It was like a sort of punishment, but then she could not complain. *Not after wanting it for so long—not after the miracle which had been handed to her.*

Walking through the doorway into the ballroom, music reached her ears along with the laughter of four dancing couples. Elizabeth saw Mrs. Lymington, a woman who had attended her tea party just a week ago, watching the dance.

"Mrs. Lymington," she said as warmly as she could.

But her warmth was not reciprocated. Mrs. Lymington stared, her nose wrinkling as though she had just smelled something that had died, and she walked away without saying a word.

Elizabeth's cheeks burned as she glanced around to see whether

anyone else had spotted this discourtesy.

Society's rules stated clearly that widows should not attend weddings, but she had been hard-pressed to say no. It was her late husband's brother, after all, and more importantly, the head of the Howard house.

*Well, head of the house if you did not count—*

"There you are! And how sad you are alone, you must miss our dear Elmore to distraction!"

Elizabeth swallowed. This was the conversation she had been most dreading, and she should be grateful, in a way, that it was happening early in the proceedings. She could then enjoy the rest of the day—or at least, enjoy it as best she could.

Although she longed to say that she was glad her husband was dead, Elizabeth managed to control herself. That was hardly a polite thing to say to anyone, but it would be monstrous to say to his mother.

"Yes, of course," she demurred quietly.

"You know, this happy day reminds me of your wedding," the dowager said impressively. She was an elderly woman now, closer to eighty, but still with the same iron core and temper she had fifty years ago.

Elizabeth held her tongue. *She had enjoyed that day, too, until the evening...*

"Now, my dear, you do not look entirely well," said the dowager with what she evidently thought was a smile. "I suppose 'tis too early to tell if...well, I know you would tell me as soon as you had any suspicion you were..."

It was all too apparent what the older woman wanted to ask, but Elizabeth was not going to give her what she wanted.

"If I knew I was with child," she lied calmly with a smile, "of course, I would say."

She hated the lie. She had never been someone to speak untruths. But she had to keep this secret. No one could know, not even—*especially* her mother-in-law.

A posthumous child, conceived before the death of her husband, was an unusual occurrence at the best of times, but given the circumstances of this conception...

Elizabeth steeled herself to stick to the lie. *She could not speak the truth. She would not say anything, not until it was absolutely impossible to deny.*

The child starting to grow inside her, her miracle, was an innocent.

No matter what its father was, she would protect it, guard it, keep it from the harm of the world.

And the first harm was, sadly, her mother-in-law.

"You will have to excuse me, Lady Howard," she said with a forced smile. "I need to speak with Mrs. Marnion about something vital."

Curtseying low, Elizabeth strode away.

*Well, that was one positive.* When Elmore had been alive, he would have been gambling in one room, and she would have been forced to keep her mother-in-law company—for hours on end.

Now she was her own woman, able to make her own decisions, with all the dignity that being a widow gave one.

*Well, almost.* She was still a Howard, one of three women now, and as soon as the family found out she was with child...

It took only a few minutes to find Mrs. Marnion, and Elizabeth smiled with relief as she approached her. Mrs. Marnion was not a friend, exactly. Elmore had not liked her to have friends. But she was an acquaintance, and one Elizabeth liked.

The feeling, apparently, no longer seemed to be mutual. A distinct look of discomfort colored Mrs. Marnion's features, eyes looking desperately for a way out.

Elizabeth swallowed down her disappointment and frustration.

Besides, though she would never admit it, Elizabeth knew her marriage had been over for years. Elmore had been no husband to her. *One could not mourn what one did not have.*

"Mrs. Marnion," she said aloud, curtsying as she reached her.

Mrs. Marnion inclined her head without curtsying, a great show of disapproval.

Elizabeth fought down the instinct to point out that she was a Howard, whereas Mrs. Marnion's husband was in trade. But that was not who she was. That was what Elmore had been.

"I have broken my vow of staying quietly at home, as 'tis a family wedding," she said, attempting to put the woman at ease. "I know society believes it to be wrong of me to be here so soon after losing my husband."

Mrs. Marnion sniffed. "Lady Romeril thinks you should not have come at all."

It was impossible not to sigh at this pronouncement. *Of course she does.* Lady Romeril always had an opinion about everything in society, and it was only her righteous standing in the *ton*—and her ability to give out or rescind vouchers to Almack's—which made her such a force to be

reckoned with.

Aloud, she said, "How very kind of Lady Romeril to be concerned about my welfare. As it is, I chose to support my brother-in-law, the head of my family, as you know, and that is what I have done."

But her words had no soothing effect on her companion.

"Oh, there is Mrs. Chesworth—do excuse me. Mrs. Chesworth needs me," Mrs. Marnion said with a sweet smile as she began walking away.

Elizabeth glanced over at the other side of the room. Mrs. Chesworth was nowhere to be seen.

It had been too much to hope that she would enjoy the wedding. Elizabeth had known it, known it the minute the hastily scrawled invitation had arrived in the second post two days ago, but she had hoped for better.

The box had to be brought, after all. Her shoulders felt ten times lighter now that the damned jewelry was off her hands. *Now all she had to do was hope that Theodosia never took them to be valued...*

Light conversation. That was all she had hoped for, and to see Albemarle, her late husband's older brother. They had only met a handful of times, and if he was truly going to settle in England, it would be nice to know him.

But the gentleman she wished to see was not about. Elizabeth's heart twisted with pain to even think of him. He had not been at the church, and she had not seen him here.

Jacob Beauvale, Lord Westray, had not been invited.

*Not that she should be thinking about him at all.* Elizabeth's cheeks flamed as her memories of Jacob—*Lord Westray*, she corrected herself silently—poured into her mind.

*Jacob, laughing on the sofa. Taking her hand. Leading her to...*

A smile had crept over her face, but she forced herself to look serious. It would not do for a widow to appear happy in public! Not after losing her husband so recently, a man who society deemed as respectable.

Another half an hour standing at the side of the room during which all her previous acquaintances, few as they were, ignored her, and that was it. Elizabeth was ready to return to her home in the center of Bath. It was only twenty minutes away by carriage, and then she could hide from the world once more.

She had forgotten the vastness of the cloakroom at Lenskeyn House, and she had to force her way through two racks of greatcoats and pelisses before she found her dark blue coat.

It was as she pulled it from the hanger that she heard her name.

“—that Elizabeth Howard brings shame upon the whole family,” came Lady Romeril’s voice. “I mean, really! Turning up at a *wedding* in her widow’s gown and her husband only in the earth this last month. ’Tis almost criminal.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. *It was impossible for a widow to do anything right!* If she had not attended the wedding, Lady Romeril would indeed have considered it a slight to the head of her house.

“I do not wish to attend another wedding until it is yours,” Lady Romeril’s voice continued.

There was a laugh—a young woman’s, from what Elizabeth could make out.

“You jest, Lady Romeril! I am being courted by no one, and I tell you I have no wish to be! Please, share your good wishes with the Lymington girl. She is desperate, I can tell you.”

“Sophia Worsley, you are not getting any younger, and if you are not careful, the next Season’s debutantes will leave you behind,” came Lady Romeril’s severe tones. “You absolutely must get married.”

It was impossible for Elizabeth not to smile. *Society really had not changed, had it?* Just less than six years ago, she was hearing the same excuses to push her into marriage, although from a different source. Now, this Miss Worsley, whoever she was, was experiencing the same.

“I do not see why I should,” Miss Worsley’s voice was strong and certain, and Elizabeth silently cheered her on. “Why should I? My life is most agreeable as it is, and I see no reason to change it.”

“Not—not marry?”

“I have all the money and connections I need,” she said airily. “That is why most ladies marry, is it not? But I am quite content as I am.”

There was a hearty sniff, and Elizabeth thought silently that her mother-in-law could learn about sniffing from the universally feared Lady Romeril. She should not be listening to this private conversation—but it was too late now to emerge from the rows of greatcoats. They would know she had been listening from the beginning.

“Do you not wish to have a family?”

There was a moment of silence, and then Miss Worsley’s said, “It matters not to me whether I marry or not.”

Elizabeth placed a hand on her stomach and smiled. All she had wanted from a young age was a family. It had been one of the reasons she had married without really thinking about her groom.

*And only now would she have it.* At last, after waiting for five long

years, she had finally fallen with a child.

*Although, of course, not precisely as she could have expected...*

“Nonsense,” came Lady Romeril’s powerful voice. “I have just the chap in mind, a gentleman who will suit you to the ground. He is not looking for love, merely a marriage that is convenient and one in which companionship can grow. You never know, you may like him. You may even fall in love with him.”

There was a heavy sigh. “I can never say no to you, Lady Romeril. I will meet him. Who is he?”

Elizabeth could not help but feel sorry for this Miss Worsley, whoever she was. It was all very well for the matriarchs of society to push their unwanted sons and nephews onto unsuspecting ladies, but really. *What fool did Lady Romeril have in mind?*

“His name is Beauvale,” said the voice of Lady Romeril. “Jacob Beauvale—you might know him as Lord Westray.”

Elizabeth almost dropped her pelisse. “No,” she whispered. “Anyone but him.”



## Chapter Two

*Three months earlier...*

Autumn had been threatening to arrive for weeks, but as Jacob Beauvale, Lord Westray, strode through the streets of Bath, there was no hint of it in the air. There was warmth in the sun, the leaves were green, and he was furious.

Not that his temper could be blamed on the weather. It was the damned Howard—Elmore, was that his name?

*Damned foolish name*, Jacob thought bitterly as he turned a corner. He should never have trusted a man with such a wishy-washy name. And the blaggard had promised most faithfully, too, that the debt would be paid before the end of the week.

That had been a fortnight ago.

Jacob was not usually a forceful man. If anything, he knew his friends would describe him as an easy-going chap. That was why, when Elmore had looked around the card table sheepishly and pulled out only enough coin to pay back two of the men who had beaten him, both Jacob and Braedon had agreed to be paid by the end of the week.

It had been a shameful debacle in any case. If Jacob had known the man had only carried a few guineas with him, he would never have invited Howard to the table in the first place.

Irritation poured through his veins as the club appeared at the end of the street. Jacob had believed the man. *Who wouldn't?* When one was the son of a lord, as they both were, one did not simply assume the man was a damned liar.

It was impossible to be in Bath without gossip spreading, however, and from the very next morning, all Jacob heard were tales of this Elmore's disgraceful behavior. Women, cards, gambling—even a duel, from what Mercia told him.

Jacob pulled open the door to the club faster than the footman could reach it. The cad Howard had been avoiding him ever since that foolish card game, and he wasn't going to have it any longer.



It wasn't like him to allow things like this to fester in his mind. Jacob usually looked on the bright side of life, taking each day with a smile.

*Not today.*

"Where is Mr. Howard?" he snapped at the man on the desk and immediately felt embarrassed. *This was not him. He would not allow the man's damned cheek to change him.* "I beg your pardon. I meant—"

"Elmore Howard is not here," said the man delicately.

Jacob could not help it. His face fell. "And nothing...no message or, or items have been left at the desk for me?"

He caught the man's gaze, and understanding passed between them. Gentlemen did not need to spell things out when it came to debts of honor.

But the man was shaking his head. "Sadly, he did not think that far ahead when last he left us. I am sorry, Lord Westray."

The irritation which Jacob had been fighting to keep low in his chest rose like a roaring lion. It was not a significant amount of money that Elmore owed him—well, to others, it may have been. Fifty pounds was not an amount everyone could quickly lay hands on.

No, it was the principle of the thing. *If one couldn't afford to lose at cards, one should not play!*

It was most infuriating and was threatening to ruin a very sunny day. Jacob swallowed down the riotous retort that appeared on his tongue.

"If you would like, my lord," said the desk clerk in that same delicate voice, "I can add your name to the list of people currently seeking Mr. Howard to...to repay a few debts. It is starting to become quite extensive."

As though to illustrate his point, the man brought a roll of paper out from a drawer. It was at least fourteen inches long and had a number of reputable names that even Jacob could recognize, despite being upside down.

It was this that pushed Jacob over the edge. *How could he not be furious?* The blaggard gave all gentlemen a bad reputation by being unable to keep to his word, and it was disgraceful that his club had started to pull together such a list.

*The rotter. The devil!* How could the man walk about town like he was king of the world? Jacob had seen him strut along with the very best of tailoring and usually a pretty woman on his arm—not his wife, an acquaintance had once pointed out darkly—when he seemed to owe everyone in the world money?

"Yes, add my damn name to your list," he snapped and immediately

regretted his tone. "My apologies again—Brown, isn't it?"

The desk clerk nodded gratefully.

"Brown, I am aware this is naught to do with you, and you should not bear the brunt of my irritation," Jacob said heavily. *Always make amends; that is what his guardian had taught him.* "I can see you understand the source of my frustration. And the man hasn't been seen for a while, I can see by that list?"

Brown nodded. "In fact, the York Club is number seven on the list, my lord," he said in a low voice.

Jacob threw up his hands. "Well, you are just as eager to find him as I am. Thank you, Brown. That will be all."

Doing his best not to storm out of the club in a temper, Jacob took a deep breath. It was not Brown's fault, and it was certainly not *his* fault. No, this all came down to the foolish antics of a man who thought he was beyond reason.

*Elmore Howard.*

He thrust out his hand and soon hailed a hackney, whose driver slowed his horses gently and grinned.

"Where to, y'honor?"

"Mr. Elmore Howard's residence," said Jacob curtly. "You know where it is, so no prevarication, please."

Before he was able to clamber into the carriage, the driver frowned. "The Earl of Lenskeyn's place, sir?"

Jacob hesitated, one hand on the handle. *That was the older brother, wasn't it—the Earl of Lenskeyn?* Was he back in town? He had heard of him, who hadn't, but the man seemed to live on the Continent permanently. He hadn't been back here in...well, Jacob could never remember meeting him.

His curiosity would have to wait. He had fifty pounds to claim.

"No, the younger," he clarified. "Elmore Howard, as quick as you like."

The carriage rattled down the cobbled streets as Jacob leaned back in the swaying carriage.

This was impulsive, even for him. He was interested in having fun, and this damned Howard had interfered with that.

He was a rotten egg, and everyone knew it. *Well, every gentleman seemed to,* Jacob grinned. The ladies were easily swayed by his handsome features and good temper.

But when one listened to the gossip from the gentlemen of Bath, it painted a picture of a man utterly unable to control himself and his

pleasures.

Jacob shook his head. He would knock on the door, get his fifty pounds, and that would be the last he would see of the man.

"Here we are, y'honor," came the voice of the driver as the hackney carriage came to a stop outside an impressive townhouse.

Jacob opened the carriage door and closed it behind him, looking up at the huge house. Well, perhaps Elmore couldn't pay his debts. This pile of bricks would take some upkeep.

"Do you want me to wait, sir?"

He glanced at the driver, who looked hopeful. "No, sorry, my man. I will probably wish to walk off my anger after seeing this brute and giving him what for. Here."

Tossing a shilling at the man, more than double what the short ride cost, Jacob stepped forward and hammered on the front door.

"Thankee, sir," came the pleased words of the driver before he clicked his horses onward.

The street fell silent as the sound of the carriage disappeared. No one opened the door.

"Howard!" he shouted as he banged on the door once more. "Come out!"

*The very idea that one could go about in life, expecting there to be no consequences to one's actions! It was infuriating.*

Jacob was aware that being a lord gave him certain privileges, and he was careful to rarely use them. *But this—this brigand!*

"Come out, Elmore, I know you are in there!" he shouted, his words accompanied by a loud banging on the door. "Finally!"

His last word was muttered bitterly as the door handle started to turn, but Jacob was forced to take a step back in surprise as the door opened.

Instead of Elmore or perhaps a butler or maidservant, a woman stood in the door. *A lady*, he mentally corrected himself silently. There was no chance she could ever be mistaken for a servant.

Blonde, almost golden hair was elegantly pinned above a face that was beautiful yet sad. Dressed in fashion's finest, the disappointment on her face dampened her beauty.

"You were inquiring after my husband, I believe?"

Jacob swallowed. The more he looked, the more evident it was that Elmore's wife was one of the most beautiful women in Bath.

Every inch of her seemed designed to tempt a man. *Those lips, invitingly pink, the slope of her neck, leading to breasts that...*

He coughed, forcing his mind away from the delectable woman before him. He had heard of Mrs. Howard; every gentleman in town had. Few had ever seen her.

The rumor was that she rarely left home, and Jacob remembered the words that had at first hinted to him Elmore was not the sort of man to associate with.

*“My wife? Better in bed than any of your little wives,” Elmore had sneered. “But don’t worry, I keep her on a tight leash. None of you will be discovering just how pretty my barren bride is.”*

“Well? Are you?”

Jacob uttered a strangled stream of nonsense and coughed to cover his embarrassment. He was hardly a whippersnapper, just leaving his nurse’s side to enter into society! He needed to get a hold of himself.

A beautiful woman was still a woman—still a person—and he could have a rational conversation with her. *Probably.*

“Yes,” he managed. “Yes, Elmore. Is he here?”

As she shook her head, the sunlight caught her diamond earbobs, but instead of sparkling, they just shone. “But you are welcome to come in, Mr...?”

Jacob stared. The world stood still. *Was this what being struck by lightning felt like?*

“Your name, sir?”

“Name?” Jacob blinked and then remembered himself. “Name! Jacob Beauvale, Lord Westray. Apologies, I was distracted by...and, and you are Mrs. Howard?”

She smiled and, without saying another word, turned and disappeared into the house.

Jacob hesitated. He was not one to believe in myths and legends, but if there was a woman in the world who fit the description of ‘siren,’ he had just encountered her.

There was a woman who could make him do terrible things. If she told him to rob the regent himself of all his jewels, he couldn’t be entirely sure he would disobey her.

A strange feeling was filling his lungs that if he went into this house, innocuous as it looked, his whole life would change.

Jacob stepped across the threshold and found himself in a hallway with three doors leading from it. He could hear movement from one and poked his head around the corner.

“I say,” he said, pouring the Beauvale charm into his words to hide his nerves. “Tis most good of you to see me.”

She was seated in a little armchair by the fireplace in the drawing room, and looked confused at his words. "I beg your pardon?"

Gaining confidence, Jacob stepped into the room. "I mean, it's just... well, so few people ever see you. The elusive Mrs. Howard!"

He laughed, but it sounded false and echoing in the empty room. She did not laugh with him, and the wan smile had disappeared.

"Elmore—my husband likes me to stay at home," she said quietly. "He doesn't like me to meet other people. Do sit down."

A prickle of concern crept around Jacob's heart as he seated himself opposite her. He knew plenty of husbands who were proud of their wives and jealous of their company—but never before had he encountered a gentleman who restricted their wife's movements.

*Elmore. That cad, that brute!* The thought of him reminded Jacob why he had come here in the first place.

"If you are hiding him here," he said abruptly, "your husband, I mean, I beg you will reveal him to me."

It was a rather strange speech, but Lady Howard did not seem surprised in the slightest. On the contrary, she sighed heavily.

"Gambling debts again?"

Jacob nodded mutely. It appeared that there were no secrets between this married couple. Even the darkest had been brought to light.

Marriage was just as much a mystery to Jacob as the pyramids of Egypt. Others entered into it, and by all accounts seemed to have a wonderful time, but Jacob had managed to get to the age of five and twenty without being tempted toward it.

Parts of him were stirring right at this moment, sparked by the mere presence of Mrs. Howard. *My God, but she was beautiful.* Elegant, too, aware of her beauty but not depending on it to get through life. "Gambling debts, again," she repeated, this time no longer a question. Her voice was heavy, and her shoulders slumped before she rose and walked over to a painting—a Gainsborough, if Jacob was any judge.

"My word!" he said as she swung the painting forward to reveal a safe in the wall.

She smiled. Leaning toward the safe to cover her hands, she twisted the lock into the correct combination and opened it.

Jacob said awkwardly, "I apologize for disturbing you—if you will just tell me where to find your husband, I can ask him—"

"You are more likely to be able to tell me where he is," she interrupted softly.

She pulled a necklace from the safe, long and with several tiers, absolutely cascading in emeralds. The sunlight shone through them, throwing green and gold sparkles around the drawing room.

“Will this be enough?”

Jacob blinked, dazzled not only by the necklace but by the woman holding it. None of this made any sense to him. *Why would he want a necklace?* He was here to speak to...

*Ah. Now he understood.* She was offering him the jewelry in payment of the debt!

“You—you do not even know how much he owes,” he managed to say.

She shrugged. “You would not be here unless it was a sufficiently impressive amount. Will it do?”

*The poor woman was using her jewelry,* Jacob realized with a sinking feeling. The blaggard evidently never paid his debts, that much was obvious, but his wife—she had more than enough sense of duty and honor, and so she used her jewels.

*Some of them,* he thought darkly, *probably were not so kind or gently spoken as I am.*

“You have done this before, then?” It was impossible to keep the shock from his voice.

She sighed and stepped across the room, pooling the necklace into his lap before he could protest. “More times than you could know.”

“And...and Lord Elmore will not notice your jewelry is missing?” Jacob asked, picking up the heavy necklace and staring at it, quite unsure what he was going to do with it.

She had now seated herself back into her armchair, and there was a look of mischief on her face. “He has never noticed so far. Do not concern yourself, Lord Westray. I have been careful. I am replacing them with paste. I know a...let us say, a gentleman who is very good with glass.”

Jacob’s mouth fell open as he laughed, despite himself. *Those dammed earbobs; they hadn’t glittered as diamonds should, but he had thought nothing of it. The minx!*

“You are quite something, Mrs. Howard.”

His words had been innocently spoken—well, as innocently spoken as a man could speak in the presence of such wit and beauty.

Instead of looking pleased at the compliment, she looked taken aback, as though she had never heard anything like it before.

Jacob’s heartstrings were tugged by pity and desire. Well, he would

be no gentleman if he did not recognize the signs, and he had seen the whole rigmarole played out in his own family.

His aunt had been terrified of his uncle. His controlling ways, his meanness, the way he had shouted, berated her into obedience.

Poor Mrs. Howard. She lived like a prisoner, swapping jewelry for the silence of others, waiting for her disgraceful husband to leave his floozies and come back here, to her bed...

Jacob swallowed. *This was madness.* He had what he came for, in a fashion, and now he should leave. He shouldn't get mixed up in this. Her happiness had naught to do with him, and if his uncle was any measure of Elmore, he wouldn't take kindly to finding a gentleman with his wife, no matter how innocent the visit.

She smiled gently, and Jacob knew he could not leave her. *Not yet.*

"Would you like some company, Mrs. Howard," he said gently. "I have nowhere else to be, and I would like to talk with you."

The look of genuine astonishment on her face told him how rarely this courtesy was paid her.

"Well, if it pleases you," she said awkwardly.

Jacob watched her; she had no comprehension of how to talk to him. *A woman cowed into silence.*

"I am permitted—that is, I infrequently have ladies here," she corrected quickly, filling the silence. "But not...not gentlemen. You must forgive me if my conversation is a little lacking. Or absent entirely."

Rage sparked in Jacob's heart. The woman was utterly controlled by him. That much was clear. *Did the whole of society know this? Was that what those jests had meant?*

To think he had laughed along, not knowing, not understanding she was so firmly under the damned Howard's thumb she had almost forgotten how to converse.

What a mystery she was. Beautiful, charming, and according to what plenty of women had said, supposedly happily married to Elmore—that was all Mrs. Bryant and her cronies could say.

*Elmore and Elizabeth, the happy couple.* Then he had met him and found him to be the lowest assort of man. Because this woman was not happy, she looked terrified.

"But do not worry," she said, evidently attempting to jest with him, "we can always hide you in the kitchens if my husband arrives unexpectedly."

It was a poor joke, one based on fear, but Jacob smiled, and she brightened.

*Christ alive, but she could be charming.* She had it in her, he could see that. He wanted to see more of her, to coax her from that shell of terror—and more. Every inch of him was attracted to her; he wouldn't deny it. But no matter the delightful conversation they could have, the specter of Elmore would overcast it.

“I do not know why you put up with him,” he said abruptly.

In an instant, the quiet and demure woman narrowed her eyes, which had become fiery. “He is my husband, Lord Westray. I may not like him, but I am stuck with him. I think you had better leave.”





## Chapter Three

When Elizabeth sighed heavily and allowed her embroidery to rest on her lap, nothing else in the house moved.

Utter silence. It was something she had grown accustomed to in the last few years—that or a raucous amount of shouting.

In some ways, she valued silence. It meant she was alone.

She looked down at her embroidery. It was a new pattern, one of roses and lavender. She had seen something quite like it once when a girl and the image had returned to her mind for some reason since Jacob had left.

*Jacob.* She should not think of him. His coming had been a wonderful distraction from the dull minutiae of her life, but still, he had taken the necklace and gone after her sharp words.

That had been two days ago. *All she had experienced since then was...*

Well. *Elmore had gone out, what—two hours ago?* Elizabeth glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece. Three hours ago, after shouting across the room, those hideous words which used to upset her had now left her numb.

*“Christ alive, I don’t know why I bother putting up with you! I’ll be with one of my whores, Liz, so do not bother waiting up for me. I won’t be thinking of you at all.”*

He had shouted, and she had cried, the same sorry dance all over again.

Elizabeth had been furious with herself afterward. After the door had slammed and the dust had settled, she had been ashamed and cried. Tears meant weakness.

She had promised herself, almost a year ago now, that she would never cry because of what Elmore said or did. He simply was not worth the effort—but then, she was flesh and blood, weak and desperate for affection.

*“I do not know why you put up with him.”*

A smile crept over her face as Elizabeth dropped her gaze to the half-finished embroidery and picked up her hands to begin work again.

*It was so easy for men to think that way.* Yes, why did she stay with him? Where else could she go; she had no family living, and everything she enjoyed—the house, the income, paltry that it was after Elmore's extravagances—she had only because she was his wife.

Gentlemen did not understand men like Elmore because they did not have to live with them. True, they knew them. They gambled with them, rode with them, hunted with them. Perhaps they even liked them.

But none of them were condemned to a loveless marriage.

Elizabeth jabbed her finger accidentally and brought it to her mouth. It was dark in the drawing room now. The sun had disappeared an hour ago, and she had only the one candle. Laying aside the embroidery, she moved about the room, lighting a few more.

What high hopes she had when first introduced to Elmore. Elizabeth could still remember the exact music that had been playing when his mother had introduced them. He had smiled at her, and his knowing smile told her she was about to have the evening of her life.

And she had. Dancing, champagne, giggling in a corner as he regaled her with some of his best jokes.

Elizabeth's smile disappeared as she returned to her embroidery. She had thought him handsome, well-born, charming. *But not for long.*

Just as she lifted her hands to continue with a particularly large rose blossom, the door opened.

"Yes, Linscott?" she said, only lifting her head after she had spoken—and then she gasped.

It was not the butler, but Jacob Beauvale, Lord Westray, standing in the doorway. And he was grinning.

"You must excuse me," he said with a cheerful air. "I knocked on the door, but not a soul answered, and then when I tried it, I admit I found it unlocked and thought to invite myself in. I hope you don't mind?"

Elizabeth opened her mouth, but no words came out. *Mind? Mind that a well-bred, cheerful gentleman wanted to spend time with her? Mind that her evening of bleak solitude was about to be interrupted by a man who made her feel...*

*Well. Things that a happily married woman over thirty years of age certainly should not be feeling with another gentleman.*

She had to force down her emotions. Delight was not an appropriate reaction to seeing a gentleman whose acquaintance she had only made a few days ago.

And besides, she was alone in the house. There was such a thing as decorum.

"I can always throw myself out if you change your mind later," Jacob quipped with a grin.

Elizabeth swallowed. She could feel the texture of her embroidery under her fingertips, but all other sensations centered on her frantically beating heart.

Jacob was the finest man she had ever met since she had married, but sadly that wasn't saying much. His presence was like a breath of fresh air, life to her very veins.

But she had to stay calm, collected. *She would not betray herself—or Elmore.*

"I...I have no more jewelry left," she said with a weak smile.

Jacob laughed as he stepped into the room, shutting the door. "My goodness, you mean you don't have an unlimited supply?"

Moving across the room, he sat opposite her and lounged back in that certain way a gentleman always did.

*It was something about taking up space*, Elizabeth always thought. A gentleman was only a gentleman if he was actively attempting to take up as much space as he possibly could.

"Thankfully," Jacob said. "That is not why I have come."

Elizabeth nodded, not trusting herself to speak. *What could this possibly be about?* It was past ten o'clock in the evening, and though she knew Elmore would not be returning, Jacob—*Lord Westray*, she corrected herself hastily—certainly did not.

*What did he want from her?*

Whatever it was, she was in danger of spiking her finger with the needle again if she were not careful. She placed the embroidery back into its basket at her feet and smiled once more at the gentleman who was making her feel like...like a real person again.

Forcing a natural smile, she said lightly, "I can call for refreshments if you would like—port? Sherry? Brandy?"

Jacob shook his head. "No, I think...I think 'tis probably best if your servants remain unaware of this particular visit."

Something strange shivered down her spine. He was right, of course, but the way he said it as though he knew exactly how she felt.

Here she was, alone with a handsome stranger. It was a wild thing, a situation a young debutante would get herself mixed up in.

*Not a married woman.*

Elizabeth attempted to ignore the handsome features of her guest as she said, "Really? I am sure I can trust my servants to be discreet."

"Perhaps you can," Jacob said quietly, "but may I be blunt with you,

Mrs. Howard? I am not one for beating about the bush. I find it takes too much time, and everyone gets themselves in a muddle. I usually just speak as I find. May I do so with you?"

Elizabeth nodded. It was a strange sort of preamble, but then it was a strange sort of visit. Late at night, alone, trying the door without knocking or ringing the bell.

*What did Lord Westray want with her?*

"'Tis Elizabeth, is it not?"

"Yes," she said quietly.

Jacob examined her for a moment before continuing. "I hope you will not think me impertinent if I say your husband is a blaggard."

Heat rushed across her face as his words sunk in.

*It was not as though she could pretend to be surprised.* Elmore had lost her respect a few years ago, when she had realized he had not suddenly fallen into bad habits, but this was his usual character: womanizing, gambling, debts...

"I am not the only one to think so. I am sad to say it."

Elizabeth nodded mutely. *To hear it so plainly from another—to hear a frank assessment of her husband, it was embarrassing.*

She knew Elmore could not be respected where he went, but to know it was widely talked about...

"You do not surprise me, Lord Westray."

"Jacob, please. If I may return the courtesy and call you Elizabeth or Lizzy."

Hearing her name on his lips was more intimate than anything she had experienced with Elmore these last few months. Jacob was staring with dark gray eyes, clearly understanding her discomfort.

"Blast it all, Elizabeth," he said with a heavy sigh. "'Tis obvious even to a man such as I, a stranger in your own home, that you receive little comfort from the man who is your husband. No comfort, no affection, nor desire, either, if I am any judge."

If he had been anyone else, Elizabeth would have risen to her feet in outrage. *It was scandalous, speaking to her like this! It was shameful, having to listen to this nonsense!*

But it wasn't nonsense, was it? No, every syllable was true, and denying it would make her a liar.

Jacob Beauvale had taken one look at her, spent no more than twenty minutes in her company, and seen through to her soul and the misery of her life.

"If you will let me," he said quietly, "I would give you all those

things.”

His words did not immediately make sense, and for a moment, she was unsure whether she had heard him correctly. *Give her what—affection? Desire?*

Then the true meaning of his words, of what he offered, sunk in.

Speaking stiffly, she said, “I do not know what you—”

“I think you know what I mean,” Jacob interrupted in a low voice, his gaze unwavering. “I can see you are desperate for a loving touch, Elizabeth.”

Another shiver rippled down her spine. Hearing her name on another man’s lips felt deliciously rebellious. Jacob Beauvale was not known within her circle of acquaintances, but any gentleman with a title was bound to know what he was doing with the ladies.

*How long had it been since she had...no, she could not think this way. It was preposterous. It was madness! This circumstance simply did not happen!*

Not in reality, at any rate. Elizabeth had read countless novels in which daring ladies were seduced by handsome and mysterious gentlemen.

But this was not a dream nor a novel. She was seated on her sofa in her own home, and opposite the handsome Lord Westray, asking her whether she wanted...

“I can see you desire...companionship,” said Jacob gently. “And I bet the blaggard hasn’t given you any pleasure, either.”

“That is none of your business,” Elizabeth snapped.

*Really!* It was all very well for Jacob to desire her. She was not going to argue with that. It was pleasant to be desired, and when she had been an unmarried debutante of society, she had a set of admirers.

*But to say such things—to think such things! It was scandalous!*

“None of my business?” Jacob leaned back and smiled. “I would say it’s been none of Elmore’s business for a while, hasn’t it?”

She hesitated. A small part of her wanted to protest, to protect her husband’s reputation. How easy it would be to lie, to say Elmore cared for her deeply and that she was content with her life.

It *would* be a lie. She had never spoken ill of her husband to anyone, but that had not prevented her from enduring five years of passionless lovemaking, no children, and his taunts about his whores whom he preferred over her.

Elizabeth swallowed. She had to extricate herself from this situation as gracefully as possible—even if she was tempted, devilishly tempted.

“What you suggest is preposterous,” she said quietly. “Ladies do not

simply offer themselves to gentlemen who turn up in the middle of the night!”

That knowing smile still played about his lips. “I know, but I want you, Elizabeth. There, I have said it. You are beautiful, you are charming—and you desperately want someone like me to come into your life, sweep you off your feet, and give you the attention you’ve desperately been lacking.”

Elizabeth found her mouth was dry.

“I know I could give you a little of what you seek, something to cheer you through those damned nights with Elmore,” Jacob said softly. “No one would have to know. This would just be between you and me.”

It was on the tip of Elizabeth’s tongue to throw him out—to reach out and ring the bell, summon a servant, have him and his delectable suggestions taken away so she could not succumb.

But Jacob was not going to force her, she could see that. It would not have been difficult to sit beside her, steal a kiss from her, and laugh as she protested.

But he had not. No, Jacob was a gentleman, and he had made her a gentleman’s offer. At no point had he hidden his intentions, and he was very clear about what he wanted.

*Her.*

And she did want pleasure. It was awful to admit, but she had expected lovemaking to be...well, *loving*. Nothing like the three minutes of painful thrusting Elmore subjected her to before he rolled over and started to snore.

She had been married five years and still had no idea what pleasures the flesh could offer. Her mother, God rest her soul, had not been forthcoming on what to expect, and so Elizabeth simply accepted the hand she had been dealt.

There was more, she was sure of it. And if Jacob knew how to help her find it.

She glanced at him, and heat surged through her body. She had been unable to ignore his good looks from the moment he had attempted to batter her door down, seeking to have his debt paid.

A flicker of jealousy wrapped around her heart as she wondered how many other ladies had received this offer from the dashing Lord Westray.

“You are mad,” she whispered.

Jacob’s smile widened. “You are thinking about it, then.”

She had expected feelings of guilt as she considered Jacob’s offer—

but Elmore had hardly been faithful to her.

"I am barren," she said quietly. "There...there would be no child."

Shock at her own brazen words rocked her body. *Had she really said that?*

Elizabeth swallowed. She was lonely, skin tingling for the touch of another. No one would ever have to know.

Jacob nodded. "All the better. No consequences for a night of delicious pleasure. Elizabeth, trust me, I won't force this. But let me show you what love should be. Let me show you how a man should love a woman—and at any point you want me to stop, I will."

She could hear the truth in his words. If she held to her marriage vows and declined this sophisticated man, he would leave.

Leave her alone. In this big empty house, with no one to love her.

She took a deep breath. *This was not a moment she could take back.* Once she had agreed to this, she knew her life—her marriage—would never be the same again.

The thought almost made her smile. *Why should she want it to stay the same?* It was not as though she was happy.

"We will have to be careful."

The words were out before she could stop them. Her cheeks crimsoned as Jacob smiled.

"Do you mean quiet?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "N-No one will hear us from that side of the house. 'Tis just...we cannot be seen going upstairs. To...to my bedchamber."

Jacob rose and held out his hand.

Hesitation flooded her mind. Once she took it, there was no going back. True, Jacob was clearly no cad who would force her if she changed her mind, but the point was, *she had said yes.* The word had not passed her lips, but what she had said was enough. She had agreed to make love with a man who was not her husband.

*Husband?* Her heart hardened as she thought of Elmore. He had been no husband to her. She had not gained comfort from his voice, his touch, his presence for years now.

She deserved better. *She deserved this.*

Elizabeth reached out and placed her hand in Jacob's. Her skin tingled at the forbidden contact as he pulled her upright, and she gasped as she stood mere inches from him.

Though no promises had passed between them, it was as though they had made a vow to each other.

“Lead me,” he whispered.

Every inch of her hand was tingling.

She said nothing as she led him to the door and checked the hallway. There was no one there. At this late hour, the maids would be asleep, and the butler would be putting the kitchen to sleep along with their housekeeper.

They were alone.

It took but a few minutes for her to lead Jacob up the stairs, down the corridor, and through the door to her bedchamber. It was only as she closed the door behind them and leaned against it that she took another breath, hardly aware she had been holding it.

*Was she really about to do this?* She had always considered marriage to be sacred, a solemn vow between man and wife. She had made promises to Elmore, and though he had not kept them, *she* had always been loyal.

Something in her heart rebelled.

Jacob was sitting on the bed, and as her gaze rose to meet his, he smiled. “Come here.”

Wild thoughts rushed through her mind. It was still not too late to say no, to go back downstairs and finish her embroidery.

But all thoughts of embroidery disappeared as Jacob leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. In that instant, Elizabeth’s whole body came alive for the first time.

There were passion and desire—it was as though her life had been building up to this moment for years.

Jacob’s hand cupped her face softly, tilting her head. She allowed the movement, allowed his teasing and pleasuring tongue to caress her lips, and gently slide into her mouth.

Elizabeth froze.

Jacob immediately pulled away. “I do not have to continue. This is all about you, Elizabeth.”

Her heart was beating frantically, and she was unsure she could put her wild thoughts into words.

“You...you are so gentle,” she said quietly.

He smiled. “Being passionate and gentle are possible, and I would say the sign of a good lover, but then, I am biased.”

Elizabeth smiled at his words. It was all so new. *Why, she was as innocent of lovemaking as a chit of fifteen!*

She may have lost her maidenhead years ago, but the intimacy of lovemaking was entirely new to her.



“Now,” said Jacob with a smile. “Are you ready for more?”

This time she leaned forward, desperate for his touch, and the kisses deepened, his arms around her, her own around his neck.

Every part of Elizabeth was tingling now, heat growing between her legs. Parts of her were waking up for the first time, and it was marvelous, unthinkable that she had a lover in her bed!

But Jacob was far more than a lover. He understood her on a level no man ever had before. As their kisses became more passionate, he pulled her down onto the bed, and she clung to him more tightly—this man she had only met a few days ago.

“Elizabeth,” Jacob murmured as he broke the kiss, staring with an emotion she did not recognize.

*This would never happen again*, she told herself as she gasped, Jacob’s lips leaving a trail of kisses down her neck. She could never allow herself this delicious pleasure a second time—how would she ever be able to go back to Elmore?

Her husband was forced from her mind as Jacob’s well-practiced hands made her body tingle and pulse with pleasure. Everywhere he touched sizzled with heat, and she found herself tugging hastily at the buttons of his shirt.

“I want,” she panted, hardly aware what she was saying, “Jacob, I want—”

“I know.”

With one thoughtless motion, she pulled a button off his shirt, and the material came away.

Embarrassment rushed through her. “Oh, I am sorry—”

“Don’t be.” Jacob was even more devastatingly handsome now that he was shirtless, a trail of hair disappearing into his breeches and promising even better things to come. “’Tis the greatest compliment you could pay me. Here.”

Elizabeth did not need to be told what he wanted; something deep within her knew.

His fingers moved to the back of her gown, and he kissed her deeply as he managed to untie the bodice. It only took another few moments for both her gown and undershift to be pulled from her body, and she shivered.

*She was naked*. Her mind could not comprehend it; she was naked with a stranger!

No. Elizabeth watched as Jacob pulled off his boots, socks, and breeches to render himself just as nude as she was.

He was no stranger. *How could he be, now that they had shared this secret?*

Jacob rejoined her on the bed, and Elizabeth gloried in the sensation of his skin against hers. His kisses were hungrier now, and she returned his passion in kind, her ardor growing as their legs tangled together.

*They had been kissing for what—a minute? An hour?* Elizabeth found it impossible to tell, but eventually, Jacob broke away and looked into her eyes seriously.

“God, Elizabeth, you are—well. Do you trust me?”

There was no hesitation this time. In the eyes of society, she knew that they barely knew each other—but there was something about him. Something deep within her cried out for him, and she would answer that cry. *Trust him?* She trusted no one else in the world other than him.

These feelings could not be encapsulated in words, so heart thundering, body shivering with desire, she nodded.

Jacob nuzzled her neck as he murmured, “If you want me to stop, just tell me.”

Turning her onto her back, Elizabeth whimpered with disappointment as he ceased kissing her neck—but that whimper became far more guttural as his tongue teased across her breasts.

“Oh, Jacob,” she whispered, the words pouring naturally from her mouth. “Oh, yes—oh!”

She gasped as pleasure rocketed through her body. Jacob, her lover, the man who was teaching her what pleasure even was, had brushed a finger across her secret place and gently teased it inside.

*What was this? How was it possible to feel so free, so wild, so untamed as this?*

“Jacob, yes, I want more,” she gasped.

“You are so beautiful, so precious,” came his soft words as he kissed her neck, one hand teasing her nipple and the other building a slow but steady rhythm inside her. “Elizabeth, let me love you. Let me show you what ecstasy is.”

She could not reply—how could she when her body was lost to her and in the possession of another? She would never be the same again. She felt desired, wanted, and now her body was starting to shake with the unexpected pleasure, the very climax of existence only seconds away...

“Oh, Jacob, yes!”

She could not help but cry out. She almost sobbed as something changed in his rhythm, and her whole body exploded with pleasure,

rocking, pulsing, utterly out of her control as she clung to him, the only man who understood her.

The waves of decadence slowly subsided, and only then was she able to open her eyes.

“Elizabeth?” Jacob had concern across his face. “Are you quite well?”

*Quite well?* Mere words could not describe how she felt. “No one has ever made me feel like that.”

Concern gone, he grinned. “Again?”

The word did not precisely register at first. *Again?*

He chuckled at her expression. “My, my, I have much to teach you. Don’t worry, Elizabeth, I am a gentle teacher. You will enjoy being my student.”

Jacob moved from her side. Disappointment flowed through her. But then—

“Christ!”

She had never blasphemed before—but before this moment, she had never needed to. Instead of his finger, Jacob had swept his tongue across her secret place, and Elizabeth had to reach out and cling to the edges of the bed as he expertly started to lick and suck the part of her that was still pulsing with the last round of pleasure.

“Jacob, yes, right there,” she murmured.

Jacob’s hands were on her thighs, holding her in place as the boiling wave of pleasure started to build in her once more, and before she knew it, Elizabeth was shouting out his name as her body rocked on the heady pleasure his mouth gave her.

“Jacob, Jacob, oh, yes!”

As the lights in her eyes started to fade, and she smiled at Jacob, who had lifted his gaze to hers, Elizabeth knew she would never live a normal life again.

*Now that she had been touched like this, kissed like this, nothing would be the same.*

“I want you, now,” she said, shocked at her own daring. “You, inside me.”

Her fingers reached out for the manhood that had been standing to attention the moment they had undressed, and it took but a moment to guide him inside her.

“Oh,” she murmured, welcoming him back into her arms.

This felt so...*right* was the only word she could think of. As though they were made for each other.

Jacob groaned, “Hell’s bells, you’re so beautiful, Elizabeth, every part of you—Christ, I don’t think I can last long.”

“Just love me, Jacob. Just love me.”

And he did. This wasn’t a quick rutting of a young stag, desperate to take his fill and think nothing of his partner.

No, everything Jacob did was for her.

As he collapsed into her arms, she held him close as their breathing started to slow.

It was a good thing she was already married, she thought as they whispered sweet nothings to each other as they fell asleep, or she would be in real danger of falling in love.



## Chapter Four

The sun had barely risen by the time Jacob Beauvale closed his front door behind him quietly to ensure none of his servants heard their master creep in at the crack of dawn. He leaned against it, safe within his own walls, wishing he had never left.

*Damn.* In his wildest dreams, he had never expected to find Elizabeth so...well. Alluring? Was that the right word for the intensity of feeling she stirred within him?

She was beautiful, no doubt about it. No wonder the blasted man kept her almost locked up in that house. Elmore was a jealous man, unable to accept anyone looking at his beautiful wife.

Jacob's body ached. She had kept him up half the night, the little minx, but he could not say no to her. Not after she had been deprived for so long of a loving touch.

A smile crept over his face as he remembered their frantic, almost possessive lovemaking—and then later on in the night, their slow, more tender, more careful lovemaking.

Still leaning against his door, Jacob let out a long slow breath. He had wanted her, and he had got her, but that was...*that was something he had not expected.*

If he was not careful, he would find himself tempted to return and give her more pleasure. Speak with her. Spend more time with her. *Know her in more ways than one.*

Jacob shook his head. *He was no young buck of seventeen; he would not be so foolish as to fall in love with a married woman!*

He went to bed her, and bed her he did. It was best to stop there.

"And how was your early morning walk, your lordship?"

Jacob grinned as his butler appeared as though from nowhere with the innocent inquiry. Alone of all his servants here in Bath, Stewart was the only one who knew of his nighttime wanderings.

"Thank you, Stewart," Jacob said airily, pulling off his greatcoat. "Yes, it was very good. Very good indeed."

It was rare for Jacob to speak at all of his midnight conquests, and

the butler raised an eyebrow as he helped his master out of his riding boots.

"I ask particularly, your lordship," Stewart continued delicately, "because you must have enjoyed yourself most heartily. Are you aware of the time?"

Jacob glanced at the tall grandfather clock. "Yes, 'tis eight o'clock."

"Excellent, but Lady Romeril is not," the butler said smoothly. "She is here."

"Wh-Here?"

Jacob stared at his servant in absolute horror. *Here he was, only just returning home dressed in yesterday's clothes, unshaven, and exhausted after making love all night!*

Stewart nodded silently.

"B-But why?" asked Jacob aghast, rubbing his chin and feeling the stubble of yesterday's growth. "At this hour? Here? Now?"

"I am unsure, my lord, but I would recommend a rapid visit to Labbe."

Jacob nodded and turned to run up the staircase to find his valet, who was waiting for him with a shirt in one hand and two cravats in the other.

"Lady—" began Jacob in haste.

"Romeril, yes, I am aware your lordship," interrupted Labbe. "Please do not concern yourself, my lord. We have at least five minutes. I have informed her that you are currently in the bath."

Relief washed over him, but there was still a flicker of tension in Jacob's heart. Lady Romeril's mere presence was usually enough to terrify a debutante, make a gentleman quake in his boots, and smarten up anyone who wanted to be accepted into society.

*So what on earth was his godmother doing here—and so early?* It was almost criminal.

Thankfully his valet had been prepared, and Jacob found himself scrubbed, shaved, and dressed in just over the five minutes.

His reflection in his tall looking glass proved that he was, at least, half-human and almost presentable—but Jacob could not help but wonder whether a five-minute nap may have been all the better.

Half the night had been lost—no, *gained* with Elizabeth's touch. What need had he for sleep?

Jacob could not help but smile at his reflection. It had all been worth it. *Worth it to hear Elizabeth shout his name.*

"Lady Romeril, my lord."

Jacob jumped as his valet spoke. For a moment, he had been half a world away—or more precisely, seven streets over where Elizabeth was sleeping in that soft and inviting bed.

“Yes, yes, Lady Romeril,” he said hastily. “Breakfast room?”

That was where he found his unexpected early morning guest when Jacob descended the stairs and opened the door. His godmother had happily invited herself in and was at this moment slathering butter onto a piece of toast.

It was impossible not to smile. Jacob had known Lady Romeril for his entire life, and she had a fearsome reputation in society. Able to make or break a lady’s reputation, invitations to her balls and card parties were coveted, and a single disparaging remark had been known to lose a gentleman his honor.

Jacob had no fear of her, however. She may strike terror into the hearts of others, and he had, of course, a healthy respect for her, but it was difficult to be afraid of a woman who had chased him around the garden playing pirates twenty years ago.

“Finally,” she said imperiously. “I was beginning to be concerned you were not here, Jacob.”

He grinned. *She was a good old stick, really.* “If I had known you wished to breakfast together, Lady Romeril,” he quipped, “I would have got out of the bath quicker!”

His guest frowned, but a smile was never far from her lips for her favorite godson. “Join me, young man. We have much to discuss.”

Her words did not strike terror into his heart—he was far too accustomed for her grandiose nature for that—but Jacob did stop at the sideboard to help himself to a large cup of coffee before he sat down.

*Anything to keep him sharp.* His mind was still swimming with Elizabeth, and if he was not careful, he would get lost in their discussion about...whatever it was.

After all, Lady Romeril was an excellent sparring partner.

“This is hardly a breakfast for Lord Westray,” she began as he finally seated himself, gaze taking in the meager toast and marmalade offering. “Your father would consider this a precursor to breakfast proper. No eggs? No ham?”

Jacob shrugged as the hot, bitter coffee hit the back of his throat. *There it was, the jolt he needed to ensure he could concentrate.* “You know, I hardly think about the title. ’Tis just there, a part of my name. Being a lord isn’t nearly so fun as it looks, I’m afraid.”

“Evidently,” Lady Romeril said pointedly. Her toast sat on the plate

before her, untouched and ignored. "Your parents would have been horrified."

Jacob's nonchalant smile faded. No one could have predicted the accident. He had seen the newspaper articles, clipped and saved by a previous butler, and discovered by Jacob when hunting for his letter from Cambridge in the study at Westray Manor.

*A boating accident.* No one's fault, no blame to be apportioned. It had taken both Lord and Lady Westray, and little Jacob, only five years old, had inherited the title his father had laughed about.

*"I'll never give it up, you know, my boy," he used to say with a grin. "Die? Me? I wouldn't dare leave your mother. She's the one who tells me what to do and what my opinions are!"*

And his mother would laugh and tap him on the shoulder and tell him not to speak such rot, and they would laugh.

Jacob could not remember the day the news had come. He only remembered being bundled in the night into a carriage and taken to a house far more imposing than his own, and there had been Lady Romeril on the steps, ready to welcome him with a grim expression.

She had raised him. Her favorite friend's daughter had married the dashing Lord George Westray, and when Margaret had given birth to an heir, who else but Lady Romeril to be godmother?

"Do you really think they would be disappointed in me?" Jacob asked his godmother.

Lady Romeril's fierce gaze softened. "No. No, your mother loved her baths, too. I remember her first debutante ball—one of mine, naturally—she almost missed the opening set because she spent too long soaking in that tub of hers."

Jacob leaned forward. He had not been forbidden from asking questions, exactly. It had hurt at first. Their loss had been absolute, and over time not asking became a habit.

*How do you ask about your parents, their thoughts, their wishes, their hopes, their quirks into banal questions?*

"And my father?"

Lady Romeril snorted and took a large mouthful of her toast before replying. "Your father? Late for anything? He would have been out for a ride long before the sun was up—but I did not come here to reminisce about your parents. I need to discuss something of the greatest import with you."

Jacob's mouth went dry. *Surely it was not possible—the gossips of Bath had not already found out about his illicit liaison with the wife of Elmore*



*Howard!*

His blood ran cold, and he reached for the coffee to keep his hands occupied.

*How could he have been more careful?* He had told no one of his plans—Stewart did not count; the man knew what he did but not with whom—and no servants had seen him at Elizabeth's house.

*That he knew of.* Jacob tried to remember every moment in that house, but it was impossible.

Besides, a housemaid could have walked past Elizabeth's bedchamber door at just the wrong moment, and that would be the end of their secret.

Lady Romeril was glaring. "You should get married."

Jacob almost laughed with relief. *Nothing to do with Elizabeth, then.*

"My dear Lady Romeril, I have no interest in getting married," he said smoothly, all nerves forgotten. "And I flatter myself by considering five and twenty still young!"

"Old enough to wed," said Lady Romeril flatly. "Old enough to find a nice young lady, good family, good breeding, that sort of thing, and settle down."

It was impossible to prevent his thoughts from flittering to Elizabeth. She had settled down. *She had expected a husband and gained nothing but a brute.*

"Not every marriage is happy," he said aloud. "I am happy now. Why take the risk? Why threaten my happiness now with the potential for a similar or lesser happiness within matrimony?"

*And, though he did not say this thought aloud, how could that woman, whoever she was, even think to compare to Elizabeth?* No, if he wanted to bed another woman, he would first have to get Elizabeth Howard out of his mind.

Lady Romeril was watching him carefully. "Nonsense. All marriages find happiness, of a sort. Perhaps not in the way people expect."

*Why was it so difficult to pry his thoughts away from Elizabeth?*

Perhaps because he hoped to bed her again. Jacob could not lie to himself; he had never been one to hide his intentions.

*Would she want to repeat the experience?* His whole body tingled as he considered it. *Would he be permitted to touch her again?*

"Jacob Montague Richard Beauvale, are you listening to me?"

Lady Romeril's almost shout was finally enough to sear through Jacob's mind.

"Now, do not misunderstand me," he said quickly, attempting to

bluff his way through the conversation. "I have always appreciated and attended to your guidance, Lady Romeril, and will always be grateful for your insight, but—"

"I promised your mother that, if the worst should happen..." Lady Romeril had initially interrupted her young godson, but her voice trailed away as emotion overcame her.

Jacob swallowed down the knot of pain creeping up his throat. *They were British. They did not talk about these things.*

Lady Romeril cleared her throat. "If the worst should happen, and it did, that I would care for you. I may not be the softest godmother, and there are plenty in society who would argue I have been too hard on you, but...but I have done and continue to do my best."

Her sadness was palpable. Jacob swallowed again. Talking about his feelings had never been something to avoid, necessarily. It was just not done.

"I have never had any complaints," he said softly, unable to meet her eye.

His gaze caught movement in the corner of his vision, and when he looked up, Lady Romeril was drinking from her teacup.

When she placed it down, she said in a stronger voice, "Excellent, so we are agreed. I will keep an eye out for you, Jacob. I am sure to find someone for you in no time. A winter wedding is always so lovely."

"Hang on there a moment!" Jacob protested, staring at his godmother's satisfied grin. "That is not what we agreed to at all."

Lady Romeril was smiling. "Oh, Jacob. I was not sure, I will admit, but now that we have had this little chat..."

A flicker of uncertainty rippled through his body. *Not sure? Not sure about what?*

"You never bothered much about paperwork, did you, when your parents died? Never thought to read their wills?"

Cold ice flowed into Jacob's heart as a sense of foreboding forced a shiver down his spine. *This did not happen, not really.* Oh yes, there was always some chatter at the club about a friend of a friend who found there was some godawful will that he must adhere to, or risk losing everything—but that was just guff, surely!

*It never actually happened.*

"Of course not," he said shortly. "I was a child when they died. You know that better than anyone, Lady Romeril. 'Twas you who took me in."

There was a knowing glitter in her eyes as she said, "Yes, I was

appointed your legal guardian until you came of age. Now that you are of age, and have been for a few years, there is a codicil to those wills you should probably know about.”

It wasn’t foreboding any more. This was why she was here then, and so early. She had discovered a codicil in his parents’ will, and it would require him to do...

*What?*

“You have a tidy income, Jacob,” said Lady Romeril quietly. “Four thousand a year, is that right?”

Jacob nodded wordlessly.

“And you know, of course, that it will only increase upon the day of your marriage.”

“My—my marriage?”

Lady Romeril sighed. “You are five and twenty, my boy, and you never thought to look into your inheritance? You thought four thousand a year was your lot in life, and you never desired more? Gentlemen never bother with these things!”

Jacob opened his mouth to argue but then closed it again. He had almost no interest in those sorts of things; it was true. He had a comfortable income, one that permitted him to do what he liked, and so that’s what he did. What he liked. The idea he could increase his income had never crossed his mind.

“The codicil was added after your mother...when it was clear there would be no more little Beauvales. That leaves you their sole heir, but your father wanted to encourage you, shall we say, to continue the family line. That is why, when you marry, your income will...increase.”

“Increase?”

Her smile was broad now. “I think the exact wording is, ‘Once my son weds a woman of whom his guardian approves, Jacob Westray, Lord Beauvale, will come into his full income of sixteen thousand pounds per annum.’”

There was ringing in Jacob’s ears. He could not have heard correctly. *Sixteen thousand pounds was...it was the income of a duke!* One did not merely have twelve thousand pounds a year handed to them on a plate!

*Well. Down the aisle of a church, anyway.*

“Someone—someone you approve of?”

Lady Romeril’s grin widened. “What is perhaps more pertinent is that in the terms of the same codicil, if you marry someone I do not approve of, you don’t only forfeit the increased income, but you lose the fortune you have. I think that four thousand would go to one of your distant

cousins. Gerald, is it? I can never remember names.”

This time, Jacob could not prevent his mouth from falling open.

*Lose his fortune?* Lose all his income, merely because Lady Romeril—the most particular woman in all of Christendom—did not take a fancy to his bride?

*It was ridiculous! It was scandalous, it was...*

Jacob smiled wanly. Precisely the sort of thing he would do to his own son if he had an heir and was concerned the family name would die out.

Perhaps he was more like his father than he thought.

Steeling his nerves, Jacob attempted to think. He had no particular desire for marriage, but he wasn't against it. He was not fussed, really, as long as the woman in question was pretty and kindhearted.

*How hard would it be to find a woman like that?* And surely Lady Romeril could find him one of those, making her pre-approved, as it were.

Jacob had no delusions of grandeur when it came to matrimony. He knew love matches were hardly common, and the idea that one could grow to like one's spouse, even have a companionable friendship, was typically the aim.

*And heirs, of course.*

“I suppose I am in your hands,” he said aloud with a wry smile.

But his godmother had already risen to her feet. “I know,” she said in a smug voice. “I shall inform you when I find a young lady suitable. Good day, Jacob, and make sure you eat something. These breakfasts are paltry. You will fade away if you are not too careful.”

And with a sweep of skirts, she was gone.

Jacob leaned back in his chair. So, he was officially on a bride hunt. Well, he had expected to marry in a few years and had even considered finally asking that matchmaker, whatever her name was, to give him a hand. If Lady Romeril was offering the same service, and that service—rather than costing him a pretty penny—would bring him twelve thousand more a year, who was he to complain?

A vision of Elizabeth seared through his mind. *Damnit, but he would be hard-pressed to find a woman like her for his bride.*

Beautiful, charming, kind. Intelligent, too, that trick with the jewelry. No one had guessed.

But she was already married and to an idiot. He couldn't see Elmore's mother permitting a divorce—a divorce! *What was he thinking?*

Jacob firmly put Elizabeth as far from his mind as possible. She was

married, and not to him. He could take her as his mistress, true, but...

A few minutes were lost in heady imaginings of Elizabeth as his mistress. But the specter of his wife, a woman with no face but who loomed over them, disrupted those happy thoughts.

He pushed the wife firmly away and returned to the delicious thoughts of Elizabeth. *What tantalizing evenings alone...*

"The morning post, my lord."

Jacob jumped. It was all very well having a servant who could move about the house soundlessly, but it did rather test one's heartstrings when he did so.

"Thank you, Stewart," he said aloud, taking the single letter from the silver platter held out to him. "That will be all."

"Very good, my lord."

The door closed behind the butler with a snap as Jacob looked down at the only missive to arrive. There was a crest on the back, one he did not recognize. He did not recognize the handwriting once he had opened it, but his gaze scanned down to the bottom.

E. H.

*E. H? Who on earth was...*

*Elizabeth.* Jacob hastily looked at the top of the letter as his heart leapt. A letter from Elizabeth.

*Lord Westray,*

*Thank you for your visit yesterday evening. I was intrigued by your proposal and was pleased to have accepted it. Thank you for the kindness you have shown me. I will, I believe, be forever in your debt.*

*However, I must advise you that I believe it will not be possible for me to accept that particular type of kindness again. I must consider many things, and I do not believe it right to trouble you for such help, even in times of need.*

*I cannot put into words what that evening meant to me. I think you understand me. I have no regrets, and will hope you have none likewise, but you must see I cannot risk him finding must tread my own path.*

*Yours faithfully,*

*E. H.*

After all his hopes, after the wonderful plans he had to show her just what life and love should be...

She was afraid of her husband. That was clear in every line, particularly where she had thought better of herself and attempted to cross out her words.

Elmore Howard had a grip on that clever wife of his, and she knew it. There was nothing he could do about it, and he was surprised at the grave disappointment weighing on him.

Blowing out a long breath, he placed the letter back in its envelope and smiled. It looked like he was on the hunt for a bride, after all.



## Chapter Five

The loud banging simply would not stop, but Elizabeth did not stir.

Thoughts of who it could be tried to surface in her mind. Exhaustion kept them at bay.

Turning to a colder part of her pillow, she kept her eyes tightly shut as her head throbbed. *What was it: five days?* Five short days since she and Jacob had discovered each other in this very bed.

In some ways, it was like it had never happened.

She had cried when writing the letter. It had taken every ounce of her self-control, but she knew if she did not write it the following day, she would never have the strength.

*She had to keep him safe.* Lord knew what would happen if Elmore had found out, and somehow, he would have found out. Eyes still shut, Elizabeth tightened her grip around her blanket.

The banging downstairs continued, echoing the throbbing in her temples. The argument of just a few hours ago pounded in her mind, too, repeating itself over and over, so the insults Elmore had hurled at her resonated in her soul. *Just in case they had not hurt the first time.*

Whoever it was banging at the door downstairs was not welcome, and she saw no reason to awaken.

It would not be Elmore. He had stormed out of the house, saying he would stay with one of his whores for the week. He would not be coming back here so soon—*although* Elizabeth thought, wickedly, as she tried desperately to fall back to sleep, *it certainly was his style.* Loud shouts, urgent banging, right in the middle of the night. *Did these people have nowhere better to be?*

The headache plaguing her increased after another five minutes, and Elizabeth pulled another pillow over her head in an attempt to block out the continuous noise.

Then it stopped. Instead, it was replaced with muttering and raised voices downstairs.

She sighed heavily. Linscott had let whoever it was in, then, and now they would be stuck with attempting to pay off someone in the middle

of the night—which was surely what all this commotion was about.

Footsteps fell on the stairs, and Elizabeth screwed her eyes. *Please don't come in here. I do not wish to deal with another—*

A gentle knock on the door. “My lady?”

Elizabeth sighed. *Why did one have servants if they could not deal with these petty matters?*

“Please go away,” she murmured softly from underneath the pillow. “I have a headache.”

“I am so sorry, my lady,” came the voice of her lady’s maid, Holland, “but I must come in.”

“No, you do not,” began Elizabeth, but it was too late. The door was open, letting a stream of light into the room.

Unable to ignore the world any longer, Elizabeth sat up to glare at her maid. “Well, really, Holland. I do not believe I could have made myself more clear that I did not wish—”

Her voice broke off. Even in the little candlelight pouring in from the landing, she could see Holland was crying. Tears glistened in the light, and in the silence, there was a sob.

“What is wrong?” Elizabeth said. “Tell me. What has happened?”

“Y-You...you need to come downstairs,” her lady’s maid choked.

Her heart softened. It was not like Holland to become emotional; she was typically a stalwart of strength, both for the undermaids in their trials and tribulations and, at times, for her mistress when Elizabeth let her guard down and her tongue loose.

*Something must have happened then. An accident? The servants, one of them, must be hurt.*

Well, there was no one else here to take charge. Holland would hardly have the courage to creep into the male servant quarters and wake the butler.

“Who is hurt?” she asked, rising from the bed, fingers scrabbling to find her dressing gown in the murky gloom. “Not yourself, clearly. Abigail? Hannah?”

But it appeared Holland was now wholly overcome. As she tried to speak, only sobs were uttered, and she shook her head in distress.

Elizabeth could not help but feel pity for the poor thing. “Sit,” she instructed, pointing at her bed. “Wait here for me. I will go downstairs and deal with this.”

If she had known, as she crept down the stairs as silently as she could, that she would be met with a gentleman in the hallway, twirling his top hat around in his hands, she would have probably attempted to



make herself more presentable.

A quick glance told her the grandfather clock had only struck two o'clock a few minutes ago. *What was going on?*

"Yes?" she said as icily as she could manage. *Why had her servants permitted this utter stranger to enter her home?*

The man was obviously aware of the impertinence, and a flush brushed his cheeks as he said with evident discomfort, "Mrs. Howard? Miss Elizabeth Sandringham, as was?"

Curiosity now crept into Elizabeth's heart. *Why would a man—she would not call him a gentleman, his coat was too worn—turn up in the middle of the night and ask after her, using her maiden name?*

She nodded. *If only she were not in her nightclothes!* "And who are you?"

Her question was ignored.

A sense of terrible foreboding hit her, almost as though she had walked into a wall.

*Elmore.* Of course, this had something to do with him. Something had happened to him.

Only her husband could storm out of his own house after insulting his wife and then expect her to rescue him in the dead of night.

She knew the answer, of course. It was the type of idiocy and the danger of it that she needed to inquire about, not whether it had happened—but the man said nothing. His gaze had shifted away.

Elizabeth turned and saw that the entire household was standing behind her, watching this strange exchange for themselves. *Two maids, Linscott the butler, Mrs. Shaw her housekeeper, the boot boy...*

"Thank you all for ascertaining whether I am well," she said with a gracious incline of her head—at least, the best she could do with this continuing headache. "You may all go back upstairs and to bed. I can manage this, I assure you."

The younger servants nodded with relief, but it took a reassuring nod to send Mrs. Shaw away. Linscott made no movement at all.

"Well?" she said, turning back to look at the stranger. "What trouble has he got himself into now?"

The man hesitated. He was probably in his mid-forties, and the more Elizabeth examined him, she realized she should not have diminished him. Though frayed, his coat was of good fabric, and he held himself with the confidence of a man in good repute.

*Trade, then. An honorable one.*

"The worst trouble, my lady," he said gruffly. "I... Elmore Howard is

dead.”

The words were spoken, and they were heard. Elizabeth blinked. They did not make any sense.

*Dead? Elmore was not dead. He couldn't be.* She had been arguing with him but a few hours ago. Husbands who argued with their wives did not die before they could return and make good—or in Elmore's case, start the whole damned thing up again.

“Dead?” she whispered.

The man nodded, discomfort on his face. “Yes.”

Elizabeth wished there was a chair she could gracefully lower herself into, not because her legs felt weak, but because she felt it was somehow expected.

*Elmore was dead.* “How?”

The overwhelming feeling of sadness was yet to come. *Would it ever arrive?* Would she ever genuinely mourn the loss of a gentleman who only sought to injure her with his words, who kept his affection for his whores and his money for the card table?

There was an emotion stirring in her, growing in strength, but she could not tell what it was.

“I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news,” said the man quickly. “And if I had known any other way to tell you, I—”

“There are few things you can say which will shock me about Elmore,” Elizabeth said wearily, shock unguarding her tongue. “Was he with his whore?”

The man's mouth dropped, and he took an actual step back.

Elizabeth smiled. “The world is indeed a most complicated place, Mr...?”

“Tuft, my lady.”

“Mr. Tuft,” she repeated. “I am afraid I do not have the time—nay, I would not have time in the whole of the world—to explain it to you. Suffice to say we have no secrets. So, how...how did he die?”

Mr. Tuft swallowed. “You...you truly have no secrets, my lady?”

Elizabeth's heart sank. *It was truly shameful, then.* “Please, Mr. Tuft. I just wish to know the truth.”

The man swallowed again, evidently weighing up her words. Then, “D-Drug den, my lady. Opium, they tell me.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes slowly. *What an idiot Elmore was—had been.* Of all the degenerate things he could tangle himself up in, of all the scandalous ways to die, his was one of the worst.

She opened her eyes. Mr. Tuft was still standing before her, top hat

twirling around.

“And you are?”

He swelled with personal pride. “Nothing to do with that kind of establishment, I can assure you, my lady! No, I am the owner of Tufts and Cuffs, the tailors. The...the other place opened up opposite my shop a year ago, and it has been nothing but trouble, I can tell you! They left him outside. I brought him in a hack.”

Only in that moment did Elizabeth realize what she was feeling. Her husband’s body was outside in a hackney cab, and it was relief, not sadness, that filled her heart.

*Elmore was dead.* And that meant no loss of joy, no removal of happiness from her life.

No, it was freedom this news brought her. No more covering up for his shortfalls, his debts. Her jewelry—the little she had left—was now her own. No threatening letters would come to her door, no duels in the night necessitating Doctor Sanders being called.

It was as though she had been sleeping for the last five years, waiting for her life to start again. And now it could.

Just when she had found Jacob, who had given her a glimpse into the life she should have had...

“Th-Thank you, Mr. Tuft,” she said into the silence, seeing he was waiting for her to speak. “I...I suppose we will have to bring him inside. I do not believe I will be strong enough to help you with—”

“Allow me, my lady.” Linscott swept past her and nodded at Mr. Tuft. “I am able to help, sir.”

Elizabeth glanced at Mr. Tuft. *What did he want?* He could have kept Elmore’s body, gone to the gossips and the press in the morning, made a small fortune with the story. *Was he even now about to sell the tale, make a little money for his tailor’s shop?*

Mr. Tuft smiled. “You won’t know this but...but your mother was kind to me once, my lady.”

“My—my mother?”

He nodded. “Mrs. Sandringham. She was a lovely woman, I must say. I married her lady’s maid twenty years ago or so, and your mother encouraged a few gentlemen to patronize my establishment. She was good to us both when my dear wife was alive, so when I saw your husband...a chance to do a good turn. You understand?”

She did. This was not a man looking to make money from another’s unfortunate situation. There were, it appeared, still good people in the world if only she could find them.

Elizabeth reached forward and did something scandalous by society's terms. She took him by the hand.

"Thank you," she said, looking straight into his eyes. "You...you do me a great service, Mr. Tuft. I shall never forget it."

"Well, now," the man said with an embarrassed smile. "I still consider myself in the debt of the Sandringham ladies, you understand. Anything I can do, for you, anything at all—"

"Is the driver still waiting in the hack?" The butler's question cut across the effusions of their visitor, and Mr. Tuft looked around hastily.

"Yes, we better bring the body inside."

It was only a few minutes later when Elmore's body was carried past her, but still Elizabeth felt nothing but relief. There was nothing to rejoice here, yet nothing to mourn. A blaggard had died, signing his own death sentence when he had walked into that place.

"Thank you," she said aloud. "As you can imagine, I now have much to do. If you would excuse me..."

Mr. Tuft bowed. "Of course. Anything I can ever do for you, one of your boys will find me. Mr. Linscott knows me. You can ask him."

Elizabeth inclined her head as the man left, shutting the door behind him.

She closed her eyes. When her parents had died, there had been servants who had understood these things, solicitors called, coroners. *What was she to do?*

Her aching head made thinking almost impossible, and the temptation to go to bed and just leave it all for tomorrow.

"Madam?"

Elizabeth opened her eyes to see her butler looking serious. "Yes, Linscott?"

"Would you like me to take care of this?" He looked at her with distinct concern.

"Yes, thank you," she said gratefully. "Yes, that would be ideal, Linscott. I...I do not believe I can do anything more tonight."

"I shall inform you of my progress in the morning," he said quietly. "Now, I would advise you to bed."

Elizabeth hardly knew how she traversed the stairs, but by the time she reached her bedchamber, Holland was no longer there. She sat on the empty bed.

*Elmore was dead. He was dead and gone, and she was free—free to marry another.*

*Foolish woman*, she scolded herself silently. It was understandable to

feel relief that the bane of her life was now removed, but to be thinking of matrimony already!

She could not help it. Jacob's face swam into her mind's eye, that mischievous way he smiled, making her stomach flutter.

*No, she should not think of such things. She should sleep. She would need it.*

The next thing she knew was the sound of curtains being opened and blinding light entering the room.

"Good morning," said Holland. She still had a blocked nose from all her crying. "I am sorry to wake you so abruptly, but...but the coroner is downstairs. He wants to see you, m'lady."

Elizabeth opened her eyes as a wave of nausea rocked her body. "Tell...tell him I will be with him in a moment."

Holland looked terrible. Her red nose matched her red eyes perfectly. "I-I can't believe Elmore's gone!"

Bursting into tears, she rushed out of the room. Elizabeth stared after her with complete astonishment until the truth sunk in.

To think, Elmore even had a few conquests stashed away in their home, her own servants. Evidence, as if she needed more, that she was better off without him. They all were.

Elizabeth hardly knew when she ate or slept in the following week, which passed wildly and rapidly, every day full of paperwork, meetings, signing things which were placed in front of her and written in such garbled legal language she could not understand.

She certainly could barely keep any food down. Everyone kept telling her it was grief.

"I was just the same," the dowager countess of Lenskeyn and Elmore's mother had said, handkerchief always in her hand as she sniffed. "When I lost my dear husband, you know."

Elizabeth had kept her face straight. She had heard the rumors of the thirteenth Earl of Lenskeyn, even if the dowager did not know it. *Like father, like son.*

Besides, she did not feel bereaved. She felt free. Lighthearted, almost. As though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, and she never had to carry it again.

Another week later, and the last hurdle was reached. The funeral.

It passed by in a haze of nonsense. Gentleman after gentleman at the front of the church shared their stories of Elmore. Elizabeth did not recognize the man they described. He had been cheerful, entertaining, and loyal—almost to a fault.

That had not been her husband.

The only two family members beside her who had attended the funeral were invited back to her home—Elmore's house, really, but it was hers now. The dowager countess had sobbed into her handkerchief all the way in the carriage, which had made Elizabeth feel guilty for her dry eyes.

The Earl of Lenskeyn, on the other hand, had been silent. When they sat together, the three of them in the drawing room, she examined him closely under the guise of offering him a cup of tea.

It was the first time they had met. Albemarle Howard, the Earl of Lenskeyn, had lived abroad for the last ten years or so, and he was a wild one with few manners to speak of. Still, Elizabeth liked him. He said what he thought.

"I am off," he said abruptly after ten minutes of awkward silence. "I have no wish to dwell on this anymore. Your good health, Mrs. Howard, and if there is anything I can do—"

And naturally, she said all the right things about not needing anything, and if she needed any help, she would call on him.

Only when the door was shut behind him did she realize this would leave her alone with her mother-in-law.

"You are holding up so well," the dowager said as Elizabeth entered the room again. "I must say, you control your emotions very well. A true Howard."

Elizabeth nodded politely as she sat down. *Well, she was hardly going to admit to Elmore's mother that it was easy to keep calm when you had no desire to see your husband alive again.*

"And still off your food, I see," the older woman continued with an approving nod. "Not surprising. The loss of Elmore is very great, I know."

Once again, Elizabeth bit her tongue. She had said almost nothing today, but she would not upset the dowager. She had adored her youngest son, despite her elder son and four daughters—none of whom, Elizabeth could not help but notice, had attended the funeral.

No, his mother had not seen any of Elmore's faults—but then, neither had Elizabeth when she had first met him. She had been so sure, as he had courted her all those years ago, that he would be a wonderful husband.

And where had that led? To a scandalous death, thankfully hushed up, in an opium den—not that she would ever admit such an ending to his mother.

"Yes," she said aloud. "Yes, I have been feeling unwell."

The dowager nodded. "'Tis to be expected, of course. I remember when my husband died..."

Elizabeth attempted to listen as her mother-in-law droned on. *Unwell?* She had certainly been nauseous, but she had managed to eat a little.

Then her eyes widened as something suddenly struck her. *Her flux. It had never come.*

*What was the date today? The fourteenth of—no. It hadn't come, and more, she seemed to have missed one.*

*And she had been nauseous. Every morning. Some afternoons, too.*

*Was it possible that...*

"—a matchmaker is the only solution, I fear," the dowager countess rumbled on. "Albemarle is a stubborn mule, worse than his father—in the best way, of course. But he needs to wed. The line needs an heir, and he has shown absolutely no interest in marriage at all. Why, when I hinted to him..."

Elizabeth was not listening. How could she be when the most startling thoughts were making her heart flutter and her shoulders tense.

*Was she...was she with child?* She would have to speak to a doctor to be sure, but the symptoms...they were just like she had always heard.

A jolt lurched her stomach. If she was with child, Elmore had not graced her bedchamber in weeks. Months.

And that could only mean one thing. If there was a child, and she was sure she was, then...it was Jacob's. *Jacob's baby.*

Elizabeth's breath caught in her throat. The thought was scandalous, but it could just possibly be true.

She glanced at the dowager, who was still speaking. The matriarch of the Howard family, she was desperate for an heir. How disappointed she had been when month after month, Elizabeth had not fallen pregnant with Elmore's child.

Conceiving had been impossible, and Elizabeth knew society had considered her barren for a few years. She had started to believe it herself.

*"I am barren. There...there would be no child."*

Perhaps, after all these years, it had not been her fault at all. Perhaps it was Elmore who could not father a child. No bastards had ever come knocking on their door with their mothers, after all, and he had done plenty to create them.

"—quite well, my dear?"

Elizabeth jumped. "Quite well—that is, as well as can be expected."

The dowager nodded approvingly. "I shall leave you be. You probably wish to cry and have been holding in the tears for love of me, which is very kind of you. I shall send you a book in a few days which I think..."

Elizabeth could not concentrate. She could not tell the elder woman that there may be an heir for the Howard line after all—not before she saw the doctor.

*And what then?* She would never admit that the baby was not Elmore's—bring scandal down on herself and the whole family name?

No. She would raise the child as Elmore's son or daughter, part of his legacy. Even if he did not deserve it.





## Chapter Six

*Four months later...*

*If they didn't want people in the audience to yawn, why did they make the place so damn stuffy?*

Jacob could barely keep his eyes open, and he stifled another yawn as the sounds of the opera washed over him. Yes, it was an impressive production. The lead soprano, in particular, sang some beautiful notes, and the costumes were outstanding.

Another yawn threatened as Jacob shifted in his seat. It was warm in the opera house, the seats were comfortable, the darkness in his box was welcoming, and all he wanted to do was sleep.

He wouldn't, of course, for he knew Miss Worsley would never forgive him.

He glanced at her and smiled. She was leaning onto the edge of the box, eyes wide, a smile on her face as she watched the performance, utterly transfixed.

He wasn't sure whether it was the music, the singing, the pageantry, the sheer spectacle that an opera offered, but he had found no other courting activity that gave her so much pleasure. The fact that it permitted him to sit in a comfortable seat with a glass of wine and no need for him to talk was just another bonus.

That last thought made Jacob squirm with guilt, but he could not help it.

She was hardly a stranger to him. Miss Worsley and he had been raised in the same circle of society, and he had seen her at numerous balls over the last few years. Pretty, charming, and wittier than half the gentlemen in his acquaintance, it had only been after that somewhat awkward introduction by Lady Romeril that he had considered her more seriously.

*And the last four months had been...well, was there a better word than fun?* He could not think of another way to describe it. Walks with Miss Worsley and her parents, evening dinners, card parties, even a ball or

two as the Season picked up.

She was *nice*. A pleasant enough girl and pretty enough to stir him a little. He enjoyed her company. He knew no ill of her, and while that was certainly not the most romantic thought, he was sure she understood this was not intended to be a love match.

Lady Romeril had pushed him to propose after a week of courting, of course.

“Jacob Westray, I do not know what you are waiting for!” she had snapped one evening after Miss Worsley’s carriage had taken her home. “She is precisely what you are looking for, and I approve, so the codicil is complied with. Why are you not asking for her hand?”

Jacob had not known then, and he was unsure now.

He would be upset if she was harmed; he was not a monster. But Miss Worsley did not invite close companionship or intimacy.

In fact, the time when she came alive most was when she watched opera. A dramatic change of the music, and she gasped, gaze darting to the side of the stage where another character had entered.

Jacob smiled. *Seeing her happy, seeing her smile, it was pleasant.*

*Pleasant.* Jacob took another gulp of red wine, the spicy heat burning his throat and giving him the courage he needed to do what he must.

*When one met a woman utterly made for you...*

Elizabeth’s face swam into his mind, and he pushed it away. It was foolish, this fleeting fantasy.

How he felt with her was nothing in comparison to how he felt when with Miss Worsley. The two sensations were incomparable.

*Elizabeth was older, to be sure, but that had not created any problem as she had rocked underneath him, the pleasure he was giving her making her cry out...*

Jacob coughed and crossed his legs. It would not do for Miss Worsley to see him aroused, especially when it was not for her.

He was a fool to think of Elizabeth. It had been months ago: two conversations, one night. *That was all.*

Yet, he had connected to her more than any other woman. Speaking with her, bringing her to climax after climax, watching the ecstasy transform her, leaving all her cares and worries behind.

That damned letter had broken his heart. Within the week, days after giving more pleasure and joy than he could remember, he had heard the news.

Her husband had died. Lady Howard was now a widow.

And he had known what was right. Jacob was no fool. Lady Romeril

had ensured he had been brought up correctly, and he knew his place—and that was certainly not at Elizabeth's side.

"Oh, really!"

Miss Worsley's whisper as she stared agog at the stage interrupted Jacob's thoughts, but only for a moment.

The temptation to rush to Elizabeth, to comfort her during the most challenging time, had been very strong.

But he was no cad. Despite all his best intentions, he had been unable to promise himself there was no part of him hopeful the loss of her husband would lead to a renewal of their...*could he call it an arrangement?*

It had felt wrong. Worse, it felt *predatory*. No honorable man would have gone near her at that time, when she was most vulnerable.

*And there was nothing wrong with Miss Worsley.*

A shriek. Jacob saw the soprano, having discovered her man loved her no more, had taken a rather dramatic approach to solve the problem.

A sob. He glanced at Miss Worsley, a tear slowly falling down her cheek.

She was a lovely girl, really, and there were no grounds to disagree with his godmother. He was unlikely to find better—at least, substantially better. A girl a little richer would undoubtedly be less pretty. One who was better at cards would probably be less witty.

*One could not have it all.* Jacob smiled and tried not to think of Elizabeth.

No, it was all for the best, his plan for this evening. He would propose tonight.

He did not have a detailed plan, to be sure. Jacob had heard of some chaps who spent weeks worrying about asking the love of one's life to marry them, some of them getting very het up about it.

A chap he knew had his marriage arranged by a matchmaker. It had not turned out entirely poorly, although as far as Jacob could make out, he had not even ended up marrying her in the end.

But Miss Worsley was not a romantic, and so Jacob had no concerns. He had brought her to see her favorite opera, after all. *What was romance if not people shrieking as they died on stage in the most ridiculous way?*

No, Miss Worsley was highly convenient. They would settle down together, be as happy as could be expected, and raise a few sons.

*The normal, dull way of things.*

There were sobs now throughout the opera house. Everyone seemed very affected by the prolonged death scene of the soprano, and Miss Worsley had reached for a handkerchief and was dabbing her eyes delicately.

Jacob smiled. She was a good old sort, but not a patch on Elizabeth. No woman he had ever met matched her.

*Could things have been different with the widowed Elizabeth Howard?*

Perhaps. But that was a different person's life.

Anyway, he had no comprehension of where Elizabeth was. She wasn't in Bath. No one he knew had seen her since the funeral—not that he had been able to make too many inquiries. The last thing he wanted was awkward questions.

In the end, he had bribed one of the housemaids—Annabelle? Abigail?—who had said her mistress wished to mourn at home, and had only had a few ladies for tea once, to keep her mother-in-law happy.

The soprano's final note echoed, and the applause erupted as the curtain came down. Miss Worsley had risen to her feet, as had a few others, and Jacob reluctantly put his hands together.

"I do not know how you are not affected!" Miss Worsley laughed as chatter rose for the interval, dashing away her last tears.

Jacob smiled back. "I knew it was coming, of course."

"So did I, but the emotion of that singer, what a woman!" said Miss Worsley with great feeling. "Even knowing the tale, I was overcome. It's such a sad story."

"You are a very good person, are you not, Miss Worsley?"

Tucking away her handkerchief, she met his gaze with a smile. "After weeks—nay, months of all this courting nonsense, you would think you could just call me by my Christian name. Sophia."

"What? Oh, yes. Sophia." It felt very intimate somehow, in a way Jacob was unaccustomed to.

It made sense. He was going to propose in a few minutes anyway, and they would undoubtedly be on a first-name basis after that.

"Now, I must go and powder my nose," Sophia said in a sweep of skirts.

She was gone before Jacob could reply. The box felt empty with only one person in it.

Looking out at the crowd, which had packed the opera house, Jacob was overwhelmed with the temptation to pull out the letter he had carried with him since that fateful morning.

He knew he shouldn't. He shouldn't even have it with him—he

should have burned it after receiving it.

In the wrong hands, it was an incriminating letter at best, a damning letter at worst.

But he couldn't help it. Jacob pulled out Elizabeth's letter from his waistcoat pocket, the only proof they had ever experienced each other, that it had not just been a dream.

His gaze moved down the short page to the section that always made his stomach lurch.

*However, I must advise you that I believe it will not be possible for me to accept that particular type of kindness again.*

Jacob sighed. The spark he had felt with Elizabeth, that attraction which had drawn him to her...none of that existed between himself and Sophia.

She was an excellent match, and Lady Romeril was, as ever, correct. If he wanted to secure her, he needed to act. There was a limited supply of pretty and intelligent women.

As though his thoughts had summoned her, Sophia opened the door to the box and smiled as she sat down.

*Everyone expected it. She probably did, for she was no fool. What was he waiting for?*

"Thank goodness I have not missed the start of the next act—you never know, really, how long they make the interval in some of these productions."

"Miss Worsley," started Jacob.

Sophia raised an eyebrow.

He could not help but smile. "Sophia. I think we know each other quite well, don't we?"

"Yes, I think so."

"And we like each other, do we not? We enjoy one another's company?" He had not expected it to be this difficult. The closer he got to asking her, the further away he seemed to get.

Sophia examined him with a sardonic air. "Jacob Beauvale, are you attempting to propose marriage?"

Feathers ruffled, Jacob nodded. "I had not got there yet, but yes. Marriage."

She nodded. "Good. I accept. Do you think they will attempt fireworks on stage in the final act? I heard they tried it in London, with quite disastrous results."

Jacob blinked. *He could not have heard her correctly. After his protestations of...well, perhaps not. But he certainly had been about to*

*profess his affection for her.*

Sophia's smile widened. "Jacob, I think you know me sufficiently to know romance is not something I have sought. I am not a romantic. I never have been. I wish for respect, reputation, and a place in society. Besides, I know what my parents expect of me. You are pleasant enough, and I think we will be happy."

Jacob's mouth fell open. He had not expected tears of joy, but he had thought...well, that Sophia would be flattered by his proposal. *If he had ever got to make it.*

"You are a good man, and you will not make unreasonable demands of me," Sophia said, her smile turning mischievous. "And besides, Lady Romeril mentioned the codicil to me. And you know about my previous engagement."

Jacob closed his mouth. *He certainly did not know.*

"Ah," said Sophia lightly. "Well, 'tis a very sorry tale but not one that will surprise. I was engaged to be married, and he decided to end it. It makes sense that with your codicil, you would choose someone you can stomach, and in a small way, I am flattered. We will be married, and we will be happy."

Jacob blinked again and attempted to take in this new information. A previous engagement. That would explain her disdain for emotional attachment. She merely wanted respectability and a home. It was to expected. When a woman could not earn her bread, she had to inherit a larder or marry the baker.

He was still unsure whether he had proposed to her, or she had offered for him, but it was done.

"Just do not break my heart, Jacob," she said. "It's already been stretched and pulled. I cannot...we are engaged, and that is an end to it."

*They were engaged.* In a few months, Miss Sophia Worsley would become Sophia Beauvale, Lady Westray, and they could begin the rest of their lives together.

And perhaps most importantly, Lady Romeril would stop nagging him—about this, at any rate.

"Oh, look!" Sophia was leaning on the edge of the box and looking at the other spectators as she waited for the stage to be occupied once more. "Isn't that the Countess of Chester? Honora something?"

Jacob shrugged. "I never met the Chesters—though I think they were at the Axwick wedding?"

"And there are the Lymington girls, and the Devonshires, of course,"

she continued, her gaze roving over the rows. "Oh, and Elizabeth Howard has decided to re-enter society. What a drab black gown, how dull."

Jacob's heart fluttered painfully. "Where?"

His now fiancée was far too well-bred to simply point. "The box opposite us, and then one to the right. There, with the dowager countess. I wouldn't wish for a mother-in-law like that, I can tell you."

Jacob's gaze followed her instructions, and there she was. The black gown was certainly very demure, but then that was to be expected for a woman only four months into her mourning.

It was odd, though. Elizabeth looked beautiful, her skin radiant. But something...something looked strange. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

"Tis a shame, really," Sophia said nonchalantly. "Before too long, she will have to leave society again and go into confinement."

"Confinement?"

She looked at him with a strange smile. "Did you not hear? I am not surprised, the gossips only found out a few days ago. Mrs. Howard is with child. After years of marriage and nothing, she will have to raise his child alone."

A punch to his stomach would have rocked him less. Jacob's mind was all over the place, unable to comprehend her words, attempting to understand each part separately.

Elmore's good looks could be ignored, as could the pitying note on Elizabeth's previous barrenness.

*Elizabeth was with child.*

*"I am barren. There...there would be no child."*

*How was it possible that he had not known this?* Why had no one—but of course, to the world, there was no connection between the Widow Howard and the rake, Lord Westray.

"That...that is unusual, is it not?" He managed to keep his voice level. "A—what, a posthumous baby?"

Sophia nodded. She was looking down at her program with no interest in their conversation.

"Yes, and of course, the dowager countess is delighted," she said, turning a page. "No heir, you see. To the Earldom of Lenskeyn. Why do you not know all this, Jacob?"

He shrugged, still feeling as though he had run into a brick wall. He had never been introduced to the dowager countess; he was far too inferior in her world.

But even he had heard the rumors about the elder Lady Howard to know she was entirely formidable and obsessed with the lineage of her sons.

But none of that mattered. Elizabeth mattered—*Elizabeth and her child*.

“I suppose she is quite far gone, then,” he said slowly. *How could he ask without drawing suspicion?* “Almost ready to return to confinement, as you say.”

“Oh, I do not think so,” said Sophia, still perusing the program. “I think ’tis almost five months, now. She has some time to enjoy society’s thrills.”

*Five—five months.*

Jacob’s stomach lurched, and a powerful urge to rush out of his box, around the back of the opera house, and to storm into the Howard box came over him.

*It was his child.*

At least, it could be. *The dates—yes, the dates certainly added up.*

*His child.* His gaze flickered to Elizabeth again. Yes, there was the swell of her belly, almost hidden by the folds of her gown.

Only she would know whether she had allowed that damned Elmore to touch her in the last few weeks of his life, but he would guess not.

*And that would mean—that would mean...*

The chatter in the opera house grew as more people returned to their seats, all eagerly anticipating the final act.

*He could have a child in the world. Elizabeth could be pregnant... pregnant with a little Beauvale.*

A strange concoction of emotions flowed through his heart, shock masking anger.

*How could she have hidden this from him?*

True, her letter had been clear, she had no desire to see him again.

But did not the existence of a child overrule that particular restriction? Why had she not contacted him as soon as she realized she had conceived? He did not expect her to turn up outside his door, not when in mourning, but how difficult would a letter have been?

Jacob glanced at Sophia, who thankfully had not noticed anything was amiss.

“Look, ’tis about to start!” she whispered excitedly.

As she spoke, the curtain rose, and the orchestra started up, but Jacob noticed not a single moment of the final act of the opera.

*How could he concentrate? Damn and blast it. He had forced himself into*



*a bloody corner.*

If their conversation had been but ten minutes later, if he had known there was a child from his loins...well, he would not have proposed to Miss Worsley.

*What was he going to do?*



## Chapter Seven

Elizabeth could not help but sigh as she lifted her swollen ankles onto a small footstool, found by Mrs. Shaw in an old cupboard. It was threadbare, and the embroidery was certainly not the current style, but it served a purpose.

As she leaned back, the pressure on her sore feet lifted, and she sighed again with a smile.

She had longed for a child for so long, and she had almost forgotten that it involved quite a long period of discomfort!

*Why had no one told her that pregnancy was quite so exhausting?*

"Is there anything else I can get for you, my lady?"

Elizabeth smiled at the housekeeper, watching her anxiously. "No, thank you, Mrs. Shaw. No, just a cup of tea and some peace and quiet, that's all I need."

The housekeeper nodded knowledgeably. "Yes, I was exactly the same with my first, if I beg your pardon, my lady. I could feel every jolt of a step in my back and feet, and only taking the weight off could give me relief. I remember saying to my Gerald, I said—"

"A cup of tea," Elizabeth interrupted with a gentle smile. "And some peace and quiet, please, Mrs. Shaw."

"Right you are, my lady."

As she bustled out, Elizabeth closed her eyes and allowed the stresses and strains of the day to seep away.

Conceiving a child—why it was what almost every woman wanted. Some were uninterested, to be sure, and plenty who were desperate were never blessed.

But those who managed it...they spoke of the experience as something divine. How many painful conversations had she been forced to endure as ladies spoke ecstatically of the changes to their bodies, feeling the life inside them grow—it had made her sick with envy, and many tears had been spilled in solitude.

She put a hand on her stomach. She knew how fortunate she was and would never wish for that good fortune to be taken away—but if only it

could be easier!

*Ecstasy?* Exhaustion, sickness, pain—that was all she had experienced in the last five months, and it did not seem to matter how many hours she slept. By teatime, she was ready for another nap.

“There you go, my lady,” said the unrufflable Mrs. Shaw as she bustled back into the room. “A nice strong cup of tea, and some biscuits on a plate for you to—”

“Biscuits! You are a godsend, Mrs. Shaw!” Elizabeth fell on the biscuits as though she had never eaten a morsel in her life.

It was only when the click of the door sounded in the room that she realized she was alone.

*Mostly peace.* The child she had longed for over so many years twisted inside her belly, and Elizabeth smiled. *Exhaustion, pain, sickness; it was all worth it.* She was halfway through this strange and exciting journey, and then this little person would arrive.

As she munched on another biscuit, Elizabeth closed her eyes and attempted to imagine what her child—what Jacob’s child—would look like.

Her hair, she hoped. It had never faded to brown, and now at over thirty, her blonde hair was accompanied by only a few grays.

*Jacob’s eyes. Mysterious, but warm.*

Elizabeth opened her own. No, she would not think of him. She would not permit herself.

She would think of their—*her* child. It was difficult to believe. She would wake in the dead of night in a panic, heart fluttering, convinced she had lost the baby, that her sheets were stained with blood...

Every time, she was wrong. Her stomach was still swollen with growing life, sheets dry and clean, and Elizabeth would lean back and wonder whether she would ever be accustomed to this strange turn her life had taken.

“And they called me barren,” she whispered into the silent garden room.

They had not whispered it. Five years of marriage with no offspring and the dowager countess had not been shy with her criticism—and her questions.

And now, here she was, in Lenskeyn House.

Albemarle had insisted, of course. The house just outside Bath, where both Howard brothers had wed their brides, was empty most of the year. The Earl of Lenskeyn may still live in England, but there were plenty of Howard properties to go around, and Elizabeth was grateful to

escape the hustle and bustle of Bath.

*The stares, the pointing. It was like being part of a circus.*

Strangely, she felt happier here. The windows faced the garden, and all she could hear was the gentle slow chirping of the countryside.

Elizabeth had reached for another biscuit, only to find to her horror that it was the last one when the sound of nature was broken.

*A noise, a shout?* It came from the direction of the front door, just around the corner. The sound of her butler arguing with someone rose on the air.

Elizabeth smiled. Poor Linscott. He was a city man, really, and had not taken kindly to the new world he had discovered in the rural wilderness.

It had been only last week that he had mortally wounded the village butcher by comparing his meat to what he could find in Bath. The week before, it had been the baker.

*Who was it now—the candlestick maker?*

As she laughed at her own poor joke, the voices halted. Footsteps could be heard, and then the door to the garden room opened.

There stood Linscott, wearing a frown.

“Who has upset you now, Linscott,” said Elizabeth.

The butler looked a little abashed. “There is a person at the door, my lady. I have told them to depart, that you are seeing no one, but they are strangely insistent.”

“And they want to see me?”

Linscott nodded. “Insistently, my lady, but I can ask them to leave, ’tis no trouble.”

She had avoided all society since she had realized she was with child, and losing Elmore had been the perfect excuse. Only once had she been dragged from her nest at Lenskeyn House, and that opera house had been far too hot.

She wanted to be left alone.

“No,” she said, far more firmly than she felt. “No, tell them to go away, Linscott. Make up any excuse—I am not here.”

“He...he is quite adamant,” the butler said falteringly.

Elizabeth had not expected that. “And I am even more adamant, and this is my house. Linscott, tell them to go away. I am not here.”

He bowed and disappeared, and within seconds, the sound of two men arguing rolled across the garden.

*Who on earth could want to see her this much?* Elizabeth had few friends, Elmore had seen to that, and she could think of no one who

would come all this way to argue on her steps.

*Anything vital could be sent by letter, surely?*

The temptation to rise and peer around the corner to see who it was increased, but as she attempted to move, her child stirred.

"Have it your way," she whispered, stroking her belly. "I will stay put if you will."

*All she wanted was for the two of them to be left alone, for all their lives.* She could not possibly hope for that with her mother-in-law—nothing would stop the dowager—but random people who appeared at her home?

The sound of slamming doors reached her, and then Linscott's voice. "You cannot go in there!"

Before Elizabeth could collect her thoughts, the garden room door flew open, and she gasped.

*Jacob.*

His gaze met hers and then immediately fell to her swollen stomach.

Heat grazed her cheeks. *So, he had found out—after all her efforts to keep the news from him! How had he discovered the truth? Who had told him? Or was her one foray into society to blame for the father of her child now standing furious at her door?*

Linscott appeared behind him. "I told you, Mrs. Howard is not available for—"

"Peace, Linscott," Elizabeth managed to say. "Jacob—Lord Westray and I need to discuss something. Please leave us be, and ensure no servants come to this end of the house."

There was blatant curiosity in her servant's face, but he nodded obediently and closed the door.

They were alone.

Elizabeth's heart fluttered painfully, and she could not tell what was having the most significant effect: the nerves of having her secret found out, or just the pure pleasure of seeing him.

*Jacob.* Twice, she had only seen him, and he was far more handsome than she had remembered.

*All she had to do, she told herself, was not think about the evening when they had created this miracle.*

*Do not think of it. Don't even—*

*"Just love me, Jacob. Just love me."*

She closed her eyes, as though blocking Jacob from her view would aid her in comprehending what to do next.

He had made her so happy that evening. If she had died that night,

she would be complete. Little had she known that he had just made her utterly complete in a way she had never realized was possible.

Nothing would compare to the happiness he had given her with a child. *She would be forever in his debt—and what's more, he knew it.*

She opened her eyes. Jacob had made her laugh, had tempted her to commit a mortal sin, and lose herself in pleasure, then had left her with a baby growing inside her.

In a strange way, though she feared his ire, she was pleased to see him. She could never have requested his presence; it would have caused too much talk.

*But now he was here, what did he want?*

Jacob did not look happy. The glare he had subjected her to when entering the room had not left his eyes, and without moving, he just stood in the doorway.

“Why did you not tell me?”

Pain seared Elizabeth’s soul. There was anger in his words, as she had expected—but there was hurt, too. He seemed genuinely pained that she had kept the truth from him, and all the reasons she had done so melted away into insignificance.

*She should have told him. He should have heard it from her lips.*

She attempted to smile. “We have much to discuss. Please, sit down.”

Jacob was clearly in half a mind to storm out of the room and refuse to listen, but as his gaze hungrily took her in, he nodded and dropped into a chair.

Elizabeth swallowed. When one was a young lady, one was taught a good many things, how to inquire delicately if a gentleman was married and listen to a dull person without showing one’s boredom.

None of her society training had prepared her for anything like this! She could not comprehend how to start this conversation, one so wild, so different from anything society had ever known.

“I...I understand why you are angry with me,” she said quietly. “Frustrated.”

“Do you?”

Elizabeth hesitated. The anger had already seeped away from Jacob’s tones, leaving only sadness.

Elmore had always been angry. No matter what, he had only one reaction, and that was to shout and rail against the world, usually ending in him storming out of the house and slamming as many doors as he could on the way.

*Not Jacob.* Jacob had depth and soul. He felt things in a way Elmore

had not, and though he was in his right to rail against her and decry her for keeping this from him, it was sadness that ruled him, not bitterness.

"I did not wish you to feel put upon," Elizabeth began, attempting to explain the complex emotions that had led her down this path.

Jacob laughed drily. "Put upon? For my child?"

"Elmore's child," she corrected quickly. "This child will have his name and no visible tie to you, Lord Westray. 'Tis the least I can give the family I married into—an heir, the heir they so desperately want."

"Nonsense. The countess is pregnant, is she not?"

Elizabeth had not expected him to know that and cursed herself for attempting to meander around the truth. Yes, the earl's new bride was with child, to the great delight of his mother, and it could change everything. If her child was a daughter, and Theodosia's was a son, she would be free to raise her child as she wished.

*But if she birthed the heir to the Lenskeyn name and fortune...*

"You could be carrying the fifteenth Earl of Lenskeyn," said Jacob, his voice cutting across her thoughts. "Or you could be carrying a lady of the house Westray. An interesting dilemma, is it not?"

Elizabeth had to take back control of this conversation. Her child would be a Howard. She would not sully her reputation, even if Jacob wished her to.

"Why did you write me that letter?"

Elizabeth saw the pain in his eyes. "I...I did not wish to betray Elmore again. After we had...I knew we could not do it again."

"But after he died," Jacob said earnestly, leaning toward her. "After you discovered you were with child, our child, why did you not write to me again? You could have told me all without seeing me. That is all it would have taken, one little letter. I would not have done anything foolish!"

She smiled. "Like storming in here after arguing with my butler?"

Her words finally made him smile. "Well, maybe. I just...Christ, Elizabeth, my apologies. I cannot believe it."

His gaze, once again, was drawn by the swollen belly between them.

"Neither can I," she whispered. Her hand, never too far from her bump, stroked it once more. "After waiting, longing for a child..." She swallowed. She would not cry. "In a way, I have to thank you."

Jacob's eyes widened.

She laughed weakly. "I had thought myself the barren one, and it is comforting to know that I am not!"

"I am astonished that it took just one time."

“One incredible time.”

Their eyes met, and heat seared across her body. She wanted to fall into his arms and be kissed by him again, feel the closeness, feel utterly beloved by another.

*He could make her feel—*

No. She must never give in to that temptation again. She was a widow, a pregnant widow, and though she may have utterly destroyed her character, that was a secret. The world must never know. She would draw far too much attention to herself if she started seeing Jacob Beauvale too often.

“Perhaps I have done this the wrong way,” she said quietly. “But it was the only way I could think of at the time. I did not have many options.”

Jacob nodded. “I can understand that, I suppose. Hardly a normal situation. But look here, I want to visit. To see how you and the little Westray—Howard,” he corrected hastily, seeing her raised eyebrow, “does.”

“You cannot be serious. The gossip! Everyone will talk, Jacob,” Elizabeth protested, ignoring her fluttering heart.

*The idea that Jacob could visit her, keep her entertained, be close to her.*

“I do not care,” he said fiercely.

Elizabeth knew what she had to say. “Miss Worsley will care.”

She hated herself for saying it. The lady had been unspoken between them until now, but she could not permit this conversation to continue without referring to her.

The silence grew until Jacob finally broke it. “You know, ’tis the strangest thing. I offered marriage to Miss Worsley mere minutes before I found out about our child.”

“Sometimes, I am utterly certain she is a girl. Then something changes, and I wonder how I could not see he was a boy. I suppose we shall not discover the truth for many months—but you are engaged to be married. Congratulations are in order.”

The words sounded as hollow as she felt. She had known how it would be. Overhearing that conversation between Lady Romeril and Miss Worsley all those months ago had been enough. When Lady Romeril put her mind to something, that was what happened.

“Even more reason, as if we needed it, for you not to come here again, Jacob,” she said aloud.

“I will square things with Sophia—with Miss Worsley,” Jacob said in a firm voice, “but this is my child, and I will be near it. Near you.”





## Chapter Eight

Jacob's heart leapt, and a smile was not too far behind. *There she was.* The woman who had not left his mind for a single moment since he had last spoken with her.

*Elizabeth.*

Something painful lurched in his stomach, and Jacob wondered what he was supposed to do with his hands. *What had he done with his hands before? Just held them here, by his sides like a fool?*

She saw him and smiled, and Jacob almost melted into his boots.

*You are not permitted to fall in love with Elizabeth Howard,* he had to remind himself silently as she wove between the numerous people in Sydney Gardens that afternoon. Not only was she a widow carrying her late husband's child in the eyes of the world, but he was otherwise engaged.

*Engaged to be married to Miss Worsley—Sophia.*

Plans for the wedding had started, and while Sophia and her mother hoped for a spring wedding next year, in his heart of hearts, Jacob wished the wedding could be earlier. The sooner it happened, the sooner he would stop fantasizing about the possibility that it would all fall apart. The sooner he could stop thinking about pursuing Elizabeth.

*But no.* Lady Romeril had attended each meeting with Sophia and her parents, eager for the upcoming nuptials, and the codicil dictated his godmother had to approve his choice.

She approved of Sophia, and that was that.

Besides, he was only here to enjoy a sedate and respectable walk in the gardens with the widow Howard. Nothing more. There was nothing scandalous about it, surely? He could be a friend to her.

Jacob's jaw tightened as Elizabeth grew closer to him, and he saw the swell of her belly.

She was not old. She was looking more beautiful, glowing with the joy of her pregnancy with each passing day. Being with child suited her, and Jacob would more likely describe her as radiant than a widow.

"See," he said quietly as she reached him with a nervous smile. "I

told you, 'tis simple. A perfectly reputable walk in Sydney Gardens, along with half of Bath. No one could possibly criticize, not if they had any sense. And you...you look...well."

Elizabeth's nerves were palpable as she looked around, evidently expecting someone to scold her. "And I told you, nothing is reputable when one is a widow, and I am with child."

Jacob could not respond. If he opened his mouth, he was going to say something foolish that would land him in trouble—certainly with Elizabeth, and potentially with Sophia, if he was so unfortunate as to be overheard.

*Damn, but she was beautiful.* Elmore was an idiot to think her beauty would make her unfaithful if that was why he had kept her a prisoner in her own home, but she was the most startlingly attractive woman in Bath.

Was it her beauty? Her wit? Her determination to find the best in the life that had been thrown at her? Or the idea that his child was growing inside her? A child that was part of him, and part of her?

Whatever it was, Jacob knew what was happening, even if he did not like it.

*He was utterly falling in love with her.*

Every passing thought and passion should be for Sophia. If he was any sort of gentleman, he should be able to control his thoughts, force them to obey him.

But Sophia, kind and witty as she was, simply did not compare to Elizabeth.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Startled, Jacob realized he had been staring moronically at Elizabeth for the last few minutes.

He laughed awkwardly. "Goodness, I do not believe my thoughts to be worth a penny."

Elizabeth frowned. "If you are going to look at me, like...like that, then perhaps I should go. I do not wish the gossips of Bath to concoct any stories about us, and—"

"You are perfectly safe with me," Jacob interrupted. "The gossips have done their work in that regard, at least. Everyone knows I am an engaged man, remember. No one will look at us and consider me a threat to you or your reputation."

They were close, so close he could murmur those last words. *What was that intake of breath? Was it his imagination, or did Elizabeth now look sad at the mention of his engagement?*

They had barely spoken of it. He hated to talk of it with anyone. Something Lady Romeril had laughed at and called ‘a gentleman’s prerogative.’

*But to speak of Sophia with Elizabeth...with the last woman he had bedded, the woman carrying his child?*

“Yes, you are engaged to be married,” Elizabeth said lightly, starting to walk along the path. Jacob matched her pace. “And how are the plans for the day going?”

Jacob sighed. “Suffice to say they are going.”

She laughed, a group of gentlemen debating politics passing them. “I remember the plans for my wedding. I had hoped for something small, just close friends, family, a few acquaintances, but I was overruled. It ended up being a complicated affair. It took weeks to organize.”

“The date is next spring,” Jacob said heavily. “Months and months for Sophia—Miss Worsley—and Lady Romeril to plan extravagance. I’m glad I am not paying for the damn thing.”

Elizabeth raised an eyebrow. “Lady Romeril? I was not aware she was a relation of Miss Worsley. I believed her parents to be still living.”

There was a careful nonchalance in her words.

“She is not a relation of Miss Worsley,” he said shortly. “In a way, she is one of mine. My godmother, my guardian when my parents died. If she gets her way, she’ll bankrupt the poor Worsleys!”

Elizabeth laughed. “Well, ideally, a lady will only have one wedding, and the Worsleys have only one daughter. I can understand their desire to make it splendid. I certainly would wish the same if this is a daughter.”

Jacob could not help it. He glanced at Elizabeth’s belly, and his stomach lurched again. *His daughter.*

“Or a son,” he said with a grin. “You said yourself, you could not tell.”

“Well, with the date of your wedding to Miss Worsley so far away,” Elizabeth said lightly, “this little one can attend, and you’ll know for sure.”

A strange tightness crept around his heart. *His son or daughter would be born by the time he got married.*

It was so backward. Children were supposed to come after the wedding, everyone knew that—even if sometimes it looked like it was going to be a close-run thing.

But this situation...it felt wrong. It *was* wrong. If things had been different, if he had met Elizabeth when she had not been married...

Jacob cleared his throat to chase away the scary thoughts. He had made a promise to Sophia, to her family. It would not do to break that promise because it was inconvenient.

Besides, even if he did, there was no certainty that Elizabeth would accept his advances. They were only here in Sydney Gardens because she had not permitted him to come to Lenskeyn House.

*No, he was engaged to Miss Sophia Worsley, and he was interested in Elizabeth Howard for the sake of their child. And that was it.*

“Long engagements are becoming the norm, though,” Elizabeth was saying. “Few marriages take place quickly. My brother-in-law was married in weeks, although now Theodosia is with child, I wonder...but that is speculation. Where will you and Lady Westray live?”

Jacob frowned. *Did she not know his mother was*—only then did he remember Sophia would take his mother’s title. “I do not know.”

“And where will you be getting married?”

Jacob shrugged as they turned a corner. Lady Romeril had been scandalized to hear he had not been carefully reviewing churches and dates. *What did it matter?*

*“It matters, Jacob Beauvale, because it is your wedding!” That was what Lady Romeril had snapped yesterday in his drawing room as Sophia had chuckled and her parents looked affronted.*

Elizabeth was laughing. “You truly have no comprehension of what they are planning, do you? What are you expecting, a date, time, and location to be provided to you, and then you simply turn up?”

“Well, what do I care?” Jacob said in a moment of unguarded madness. *By God, she was beautiful.* “I will get married on a date which was not decided by me at a wedding utterly chosen by the bride, paid for by her family, and then I am wed. My opinion is not needed nor desired, is it?”

The bitterness growing in his heart had overspilled, and he regretted it the moment the words were out of his mouth.

*But it was all wrong.*

*Wrong, wrong, wrong—and was he doing anything about it? No.* He was too much of a fool. Too much a coward to risk losing it all when the codicil was in reach, and Elizabeth showed no signs of affection. Too much a gentleman. Sophia Worsley had been left at the altar once before. He was not about to break her second engagement.

Perhaps if he had more nerve, was more a gentleman with spirit, like Mercia or Marnmouth, he would have done something. As it was, he was with the woman he was falling in love with, the woman carrying his

child, talking to her about his marriage to another. *Madness!*

What was he supposed to do, tell Elizabeth about the codicil, as if that explained why he was striding headlong into a marriage both of them knew he did not want?

It would be admitting he had no control over his fate, over his own life.

No, the codicil would not simply disappear with the talking of it, and at the root of this was a real person with real hopes and desires. Sophia Worsley deserved better.

“You have not known Miss Worsley long, have you?”

Elizabeth’s voice brought him back from his thoughts, grounding him as nothing else could. She had stopped. “You do not mind if we sit, do you? I find being on my feet for too long makes me overly tired.”

“No, no, of course not!” Jacob babbled. *Christ alive, why had he not thought of that? The one opportunity to see her and their growing child, and he had suggested a walk?* “Here, sit on this bench.”

She took his hand as naturally as if they had been spouses as she lowered herself onto the bench, and Jacob forced down the temptation to keep hold of it as he sat beside her.

“Miss Worsley,” she prompted after a moment of silence. “You have become better acquainted with her recently.”

Jacob nodded as he watched the world go by. “Yes, it has all...I have known of her for years, of course. The engagement was quick, I suppose.”

“I did overhear something about the two of you being introduced at my brother-in-law’s wedding,” Elizabeth said. She spoke slowly, as though choosing her words carefully. “Albemarle Howard, the Earl of Lenskeyn, you know. Lady Romeril seemed to believe you would suit.”

He almost smiled. *Well, he had always considered Lady Romeril a wily woman.*

“I had not realized her machinations went back that far,” he said aloud. “I have to praise Lady Romeril for her matchmaking skills. She could give Miss Ashbrooke a few lessons.”

“I must admit, I am a tad afraid of her,” Elizabeth confessed. She smiled, and his heart contracted.

“I know her too well for that,” he laughed. “Lady Romeril is certainly a fearsome woman and one to be respected and admired. She is...well, not one who is easy to love, but I have grown to deeply care for her. One cannot have Lady Romeril as your godmother and guardian and not!”

Elizabeth laughed, and there was that tug again—though lower than his stomach, this time.

*Damnit, he was lying to himself if he continued to try and tell himself he was not falling in love with her.*

*Falling?* He had already fallen—jumped. And not just for her body, delicious as it was.

No, Elizabeth was far more than that. She had suffered through a marriage that would have conquered many other women and still had retained her humanity, her femininity. She still knew how to laugh. She had seemed dead when married to Elmore, but now he had the honor of seeing her come alive.

Someone stared at them as they passed. It would never do for Elizabeth to feel the rebuke of society.

“Marriage is all a mystery to me, really,” he said more seriously. “You are far more likely to impart wisdom to me on this matter.”

For the second time in their conversation, Jacob wished he had just thought to keep his foolish mouth shut. *Elizabeth had hated Elmore!* True, she had never admitted as much, but what widow would desecrate the memory of her husband?

*Why was he incapable of preventing himself from putting his foot in it?*

But as he glanced nervously at Elizabeth, he saw a sarcastic smile on her face. “I do not think so. Marriage is not something one can teach. It is far more interesting than that, more nuanced. ’Tis about the person you are married to, more than anything else. I was an expert at being married to Elmore, not that it took much, but I am not sure I could advise on marriage to anyone else.”

“I would like to be an expert in marriage to you.”

The words had escaped his lips without thought, just desire flowing from his mind to his tongue. And for the first time, he saw the attraction he felt mirrored in her. Elizabeth colored, and her gaze dropped to her hands across her belly before she spoke.

“What did you say?”

She was giving him a chance, he knew, to retract the statement. He swallowed down the impulse to shift closer to her on the bench and tried to pull his harried thoughts into order.

*Was he brave enough to continue this line of conversation? Was it right to share his desires with her when there was nothing he could do about it?*

“I never wished to stop seeing you,” he said hoarsely. “I would have wanted...more of you. More often. When Elmore...before he died.”

Jacob watched her swallow, saw the telltale signs of hesitation across

her features.

"I wanted it, too," she whispered. "But I was overcome with guilt, and then when he died...I felt I had been punished."

Elizabeth paused and finally looked at him. Her blue eyes sparkled in the weak autumn sunlight. "And the worst of it was, I didn't feel guilty. He was a bad man, my husband. Elmore did not deserve the good reputation he had, and to this day, I do not know how he managed it. You treated me better than he ever did, and I could see myself..."

Jacob's breath caught in this throat. *Was this it? Was she about to admit that she loved him?*

He was not sure what he would do if she said she cared for him. Sophia's face rose in his memory, the words she had spoken in that opera box.

*"Just do not break my heart, Jacob. It's already been stretched and pulled to endurance. I cannot...we are engaged, and that is an end to it."*

Elizabeth's lips opened to speak.

"Good day, Mrs. Howard." A gentleman passed and inclined his head, and Elizabeth shut her mouth as she returned the courtesy.

*Damn and blast it!* Jacob could not help feeling outraged fate had not even given him one chance to hear what she truly felt about him.

"Well, I feel quite exhausted," said Elizabeth quietly, a smile on her face. "I am a widow, Lord Westray, and a pregnant one at that. I believe I should return home, where I can rest."

Jacob nodded. He had been fortunate to tempt her outside Lenskeyn House in the first place, but perhaps now he had lost that right. Maybe she would not want to risk speaking her feelings again.

"Here, let me help you," he said hurriedly, seeing her struggle to rise to her feet.

She was certainly heavier as Jacob helped pull her upright, and he placed her hand in his arm as they started toward her carriage.

"Mrs. Howard! I did not know you were back in Bath! And...oh. A gentleman friend."

The words were spoken callously, and as Jacob looked around, he saw with a sinking heart that the speaker was the notorious gossip, Mrs. Bryant.

"Well," she sniffed before Elizabeth had a chance to say anything. "Each to their own, I suppose. I would always hope to be a *respectable* widow."

She bustled away with a haughty air, and Jacob felt Elizabeth's grip tighten on his arm.

“Well,” she said quietly. “That will be all over town before the evening.”

Jacob wanted very much to swear but restrained himself. “Two friends, out for a walk?”

Elizabeth glanced at him, and Jacob’s heart twisted.

*Two friends. Friends, indeed. No, he wanted to be far more than friends, and if he was not much mistaken, so did she.*

The words would never be spoken, of course. As he helped her into the carriage and watched it rattle away, back to the safety of Lenskeyn House, Jacob shook his head.

*No, they would never speak the truth. Once it was said, there would be no going back.*





## Chapter Nine

The looking glass in the hall of Lenskeyn House showed a woman who had, if possible, grown since she had last examined her reflection.

Two months left before she would meet her little miracle.

“Now then, my lady, please stay still.”

Her maid’s voice was stern, and Elizabeth’s smile disappeared. “Yes, Holland.”

Her demure reply did not warm the cold expression on the servant’s face as she adjusted Elizabeth’s bonnet.

These were Howard servants, those chosen by her late husband and then her mother-in-law. None had been chosen for their loyalty to her.

That would change over time. But not yet. She had to be careful not to be seen as too excited to throw off the shackles of the Howard family, especially while living in their house.

*Well. One of their houses.*

“There,” said Holland stiffly. “You look lovely.”

Elizabeth nodded. “Thank you.”

*Whose wild idea had it been to go to the theater?* She certainly had not mentioned it, but from memory, it had not been Jacob either. The idea had just sprung up between them in one of their many conversations, an idea to give them time together and crucially, in a way, society could not critique.

*Who would blame her for wanting to go to the theater?*

True, the reviews were terrible—but Elizabeth was starting to get bored being kept indoors, never seeing anyone, never doing anything.

It would only get worse when she went into confinement.

Jacob made every day she saw him so memorable, so full of joy and laughter. Their numerous visits to Sydney Gardens. That carriage ride when they had got caught in the rain. Playing cards late into the night when she could not sleep, Jacob entertaining her with snippets of gossip.

It was wild. *She was a widow.* The last thing she should be doing was being joyful, and the idea that she was smiling because of another

gentleman...

Elizabeth swallowed and pulled the ribbon on her bonnet tighter. She would always be a widow. Marriage would only complicate her already complex life.

Her child may need a father, but she wanted Jacob, and she could not have him. She would remain the Widow Howard for the rest of her days.

"The Widow Howard!" Jacob had laughed only a few days ago. "Goodness, what a title!"

And she had laughed, but behind the laughter had been sorrow. *Yes, what a title indeed.*

*What she would give to become Lady Westray.*

Elizabeth swallowed. She would have to be careful this evening. That irritating Mrs. Bryant, of all people, had spotted them together. That was probably why she had started to encourage Jacob to visit Lenskeyn House. The planning had not been overly different, and Elizabeth told herself she only kept Jacob's visits from most of the servants to reduce their duties.

*Why did he make her feel this way—and why was she so sure she needed to keep this part of her heart secret?*

"And when will Lord Westray's carriage arrive?"

Elizabeth was pulled from her thoughts to face the rather stern-looking maid, who had evidently decided to see her mistress off.

*Had she guessed?* Had all the servants assumed their mistress had rather un-widowlike affection for the dashing young gentleman who turned up at Lenskeyn House at least twice a week?

"Perhaps another ten minutes or so," she said after glancing at the grandfather clock. "You may go, Holland. I am sure you have more interesting things to do than wait with me."

"I suppose Lord Westray will take care of you then, my lady," Holland said with just a hint of a sneer and turned on her heels before Elizabeth could say anything—shooting her mistress a scornful look before closing the door.

Elizabeth sank slowly into a chair, legs suddenly unable to support her weight.

*Well, it was not as though it was a surprise.* She knew what most of her servants thought of her. How many gossiped about her in the kitchens? Shared their predictions of what their mistress was up to, making a fool of herself with that gentleman who was already engaged to another?

Bile crept up her throat, and guilt streamed through her veins.

Jacob made her feel alive, and not just that encounter in her bedchamber.

Elizabeth swallowed. Perhaps she was seeing things that were not there. She was drawn to him like a moth to a flame, and it could all end in flames.

"You are a widow, Elizabeth," she murmured quietly. "A widow with child. You should be concentrating on your baby, not some gentleman."

*But he wasn't just some gentleman, was he?* She moved to the window overlooking the long drive. Jacob was the father of the child who stirred within her, and for that, she simply could not stay away.

*True, his return to her life with a fiancée in tow had certainly been a shock.* Elizabeth smiled wanly at her reflection in the window as the darkening evening showed no sign of an approaching carriage.

Miss Sophia Worsley was, from all she had heard, a lovely woman. But Jacob was still pursuing *her*, there was no doubt about that.

*"I never wished to stop seeing you. I would have wanted...more of you. More often. When Elmore...before he died."*

It had been an unguarded moment, revealing his heart, and it made hers sing.

Jacob was not in love with Miss Worsley. It was impossible to lie to herself any longer. If Jacob told her this evening, or any evening, that he ended his engagement with Miss Worsley, her heart would leap. If he went further, told her he wished to marry her...

*Well, Elizabeth would say yes, gossips be damned.*

The very thought of Jacob declaring his love was thrilling, quickening her heart as their son or daughter quickened within her. As her child grew, so did her feelings for Jacob Westray.

There! Out of the darkness came a pinprick of light, growing larger until the sound of the carriage reached Elizabeth's ears. It had felt like forever, waiting for him, and now he was finally here.

She threw open the door as Jacob stepped out of the carriage before it came to a stop.

"Only a tiny bit late," he said with a smile. "I have no excuse at all, and therefore you do not have to forgive me. Would you like a hand up?"

Elizabeth nodded, not trusting her mouth. There was something so wild, so untamed about Jacob. He was a perfect gentleman, of course, he knew all the niceties and rules of society, but still...

"Goodness, that child of ours—yours," Jacob amended hastily, "is certainly growing!"

Elizabeth shook her head as he almost had to lift her into the carriage. "I will certainly be pleased when this little one enters the world. The sooner they can learn to walk for themselves, the better!"

She fell against the cushion of the carriage and tried to catch her breath. Everything was exhausting these days, and any sort of exertion made it difficult for her lungs to catch the air she needed.

Jacob jumped up and sat opposite her. "I shall have to bring a winch next time!"

"You shall not!" Elizabeth could not help but smile. "You will not need to, anyway. Soon I will not even be able to move!"

They laughed together as the carriage started to move, rocking gently as it made its way back down the drive and onto the road to Bath.

"So," she said as lightly as she could. "Obligatory question about your wedding planning?"

*Why did it hurt so much—why did she force herself to do it every time, reminding herself forcefully he was not hers?*

Jacob made a face in the darkness. "Obligatory answer. 'Tis going, let us say that. I cannot possibly summon up the interest in lace and doilies and how many gowns one bride needs, so let's not even dwell on it."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes, Elizabeth soaking in his presence like a warm bath. Just being close to him soothed her soul.

*What was she going to do when he wed and become the official property of Miss Worsley—the new Lady Westray?*

"I suppose you will get married again one day," Jacob said suddenly into the silence. "With your own wedding to plan."

Elizabeth shook her head. "I am a widow, remember."

The carriage lurched as they turned a corner, horse hooves clattering into the night air.

Elizabeth swallowed. *She had to say this, make it clear to him.* "Many widows never remarry Jacob, particularly those with children. Society expects a woman's loyalty to be to her descendants."

Jacob frowned. "You really think you will never marry again? You will remain the widow forever?"

"Yes."

Jacob grinned.

She fought to keep control of her expression. *What she would not give for him to keep speaking softly to her, in that voice, using her name...*

"You think I want any other man to be the father of our child?"

Her words had been spoken instinctively, and Elizabeth saw the effect they had on him. Jacob moved to sit beside her, his hands inches from hers. If the carriage rocked slightly, she could pretend to be steadying herself, she could reach out and...

She lifted her gaze to his and swallowed. Jacob was looking at her with some sort of fierce pride, as though he would kiss her at any moment.

The carriage stopped.

"Theater, m'lord!" The driver's voice rang out into the silence.

Elizabeth sighed, her head falling.

"It appears we are here," whispered Jacob. "Damn it. Right. The theater."

If it had been Elizabeth's driver, she would have instructed him to drive around the town once more—anything to give herself and Jacob just a little more time together, without the stares of society.

But this was Jacob's carriage, and as he helped her down to the pavement, she watched the heads turn and whispers start.

"That is surely not Westray's betrothed—Miss Worsley?"

"Don't be daft. You think he would bring a heavily pregnant fiancée here? No, that's...is that the Widow Howard?"

"Scandalous, I call it. And that poor Miss Worsley, where is she?"

Elizabeth held her head up high as she waited for Jacob to give some final instructions to his driver.

Murmurs grew. If they suspected only half of the truth, they would be even more outraged.

"Are you quite well?"

Elizabeth jumped at the closeness of Jacob's voice. She nodded, not permitting her voice to speak. She did not trust it. She did not trust herself.

Her judgment had disappeared when she had met Jacob Beauvale. *What did she think she was doing here?*

The play disappeared into the fogs of her mind when they took their seats. It was of mediocre quality, and she could not concentrate anyway. All she could think of was the gentleman beside her. The gentleman who was not hers, and yet had more of a claim to her than any other man living.

*If only this could be her life.*

The final curtain was falling before Elizabeth knew it. The last act, in particular, had been impossible to watch as heads in the audience

turned to stare. It appeared her life was far more entertaining than the stage.

Heat rose across her face, and the heaviness of her bump grew with each step as they started to leave the theater.

“And there she is! I had never believed Mrs. Bryant, but—”

“Right here, in public! The nerve of that woman, and after poor Elmore has only been in his grave a few—”

“What the dowager countess thinks of it all, I dread to—”

*All she wanted was to be home.* This had been a mistake. Elizabeth would not permit any more excursions in public with Jacob. She should never have allowed it in the first place.

“So, what did you think of the play?” Jacob asked as he offered his hand to her.

Elizabeth blinked. Somehow, they had made it to the outside of the theater, and there, a charger waiting to rescue her, was Jacob’s carriage.

She took his hand gratefully as she attempted to step into it. “Well, I admit I—arrgh!”

Utterly unable to keep her balance as she had lifted a leg to enter the carriage, she had started to tilt backward. Panic rushed through her as gravity took hold, and Elizabeth would have crashed to the ground and undoubtedly broken her back if a strong arm had not grabbed her and brought her close.

*Jacob.* He had caught her, saved her from severe harm, and where his hand touched her, Elizabeth could feel her skin burn.

*She wanted him. She wanted him to touch her all over, but that was an impossible wish and one she would never utter. How could she?*

“Careful,” he said as she clung to him. “You may do yourself an injury.”

Elizabeth was thankfully saved from responding by Jacob’s driver stepping beside her.

“Let me help, m’lady, m’lordship. I can get you in,” he said jovially.

She was soon in the carriage, heart frantically beating. Mere seconds later, Jacob joined her, and the carriage rattled away from the theater.

Breath slowing, Elizabeth smiled as her child squirmed inside her. It appeared that little Westray had not enjoyed the almost tumble either.

“You are smiling,” said Jacob from the seat opposite. “I would have thought an almost catastrophic fall would have wiped that smile from your face!”

“Come here,” she said quietly.

He looked confused as he moved in the carriage to sit beside her, and

he frowned as she took his hand in hers—but his eyes widened in an expression of wonder as she placed it on her stomach.

Their child kicked again, and a look of divine contentment washed over its father. “I can...I can feel them. Our baby.”

Elizabeth swallowed. *This was all wrong, and yet so right.* She was falling in love with the one man in the world she could not have.

Jacob belonged to Miss Worsley. After the scandal of her previously broken engagement, she was hardly about to allow her second to fall apart. Miss Worsley would become Lady Westray.

It was reckless to be seen with Jacob. She knew that. She was already breaking so many rules. Perhaps there were a few more she could break.

Swallowing and keeping his voice low, Jacob whispered, “Elizabeth. Lizzy, I am...I’m falling in love with you.”

There they were, the words she had thought he would never say. Affection for him rushed through her, but even as she whispered, “I know,” she could not bring herself to reciprocate.

*She mustn’t. Once she did that, the line was crossed—one they could never retreat behind. That would be it. The end of their...was this friendship?*

The carriage bumped and turned a corner, sliding Jacob into her, and pushing her into the corner of the carriage.

“I do apologize,” Jacob began. “The carriage—”

His arms had been put out to prevent him from crushing her, and Elizabeth acted instinctively, without thought. She wanted to feel him, wanted the sensation of him around her. She took his hands and put them around her waist.

The kiss started slowly, almost innocently. He was reverential, and it was only when Elizabeth moaned in his mouth that they became fiercer, more passionate, until they were utterly lost in either other.

When they finally broke apart, Jacob grinned. “We may have met in...well, strange circumstances—”

Elizabeth laughed. “Strange?”

“I wish I were not marrying Miss Worsley.”

His words echoed in the small carriage. Elizabeth swallowed down her request, the hope that had immediately risen in her mind: that he would break the engagement. *How could she put into words her desire for him? How could she ask a gentleman to upturn his life for her because of one night half a year ago?*

The carriage came to a stop, and Elizabeth saw the front door of Lenskeyn House through the window.

If only she had the courage to ask Jacob to leave Miss Worsley. It was all wrong. *The scandal, the shame of it all—and what if he did not? It was all very well to say one wished an engagement was at an end, but in whose power was that? His own!*

“You were about to say something,” Jacob murmured, not taking his eyes away.

Elizabeth blushed. “I know.”

He leaned forward to kiss her again, and she welcomed it, welcomed him, the father of her child, the one gentleman who had ever looked on her with kindness.

But eventually, she had to break the kiss. *This could not continue.* “I must go in.”

“Alone?” Jacob breathed.

Elizabeth nodded. “Yes. Yes, alone.”





## Chapter Ten

The gravel crunched under his feet as Jacob jumped down from his horse. The beast was sweating, despite the chill in the air. It was a bright wintery day, and he had forced Thunder to go faster. Every galloping step had taken him closer to Elizabeth. Jacob's heart had grown lighter with each passing moment.

*Elizabeth.* She made his heart sing, those stolen kisses only a few weeks ago, a moment of madness he had not been brave enough to repeat.

Walking Thunder to the stables, Jacob nodded at the lad who knew him—and most importantly, appreciated the coins he threw his way.

“There you go, Tom,” Jacob said with a grin, placing a half-crown in his palm. “Rub her down for me, won’t you, and have her settled in a stall for a few hours. I won’t be here long.”

A strange noise made him turn around. There was no one else in the stable yard, and it seemed to be from inside the house. *A shout?*

“Right y’are, m’lord,” said Tom, a scrappy boy of about eight or nine. “And oats?”

Jacob nodded. “As many as she can have and water, too. Thank you, Tom.”

It was a short walk from the stable yard to the side door he used whenever he visited.

*Not that they were doing anything he should be ashamed of.* Whenever Jacob awoke in the dead of night, wishing things were different, he consoled himself with that belief.

He smiled as he jogged up the steps at the corner of the kitchen gardens. They had made so many good memories in this house, despite Elizabeth’s dislike for it.

Elizabeth was attempting to teach him the piano, utterly failing as his fingers simply did not obey. That time they had played cards, and she had cheated hand after hand without him realizing. And beyond the house, too, those trips to Sydney Gardens, her hand on his arm, the sensation of her, the weight of her trust on him.

That one excursion to the theater which, in hindsight, was probably a mistake.

*"Just do not break my heart, Jacob. It's already been stretched and pulled to endurance. I cannot...we are engaged, and that is an end to it."*

Jacob's jaw clenched as he turned a corner, and a crisp wintery breeze stole his breath.

He had fallen in love with the widow he had seduced before she had even lost her husband. Now she was carrying his child, and he was engaged to another.

*Was this a punishment? Some sort of divine retribution?*

Elizabeth loved him. Sophia cared little if he was any judge, and so he poured all his hopes and dreams toward Elizabeth.

Their child would be born in a few weeks probably, and society would know him as the child of Elmore Howard.

The pretense was important; he was no fool. Elizabeth had wanted a child for so long, and now the damned Howard family could leave her alone. She had proven to the world that she could indeed conceive a child.

*Still, it did not prevent him from wishing he could shout from the rooftops that it was his child. His son or daughter.*

His knuckles were half numb as he knocked on the door. Usually, little Betty would open it or one of the underfootmen.

But this time, nothing happened. No one answered. Stamping his feet, Jacob blew into his hands before knocking on the door again.

Nothing.

Jacob frowned. What the servants truly thought of the gentleman from town who visited every week and their mistress who permitted it, he could not tell.

Instead of knocking a third time, Jacob reached for the handle. It did not budge. The door was locked.

Only then did fear rush through his heart, searing pain that forced him to lean against the door barring entry.

Had Elizabeth decided to bar him from her door? Her confinement had started, Jacob knew, his heart attempting to exit his body through his chest, but they had agreed—or at least, he had thought they had decided he would still be permitted to visit.

*Could she have changed her mind?* Had she finally decided after weeks of indecision and unsaid words between them, that he had not acted well?

*That damned engagement. That accursed codicil.*

Jacob bit his lip. Sophia was unhappy, he was unhappy, and Elizabeth was unhappy. The only person enjoying this situation was Lady Romeril.

His soul was torn. On the one side was Miss Sophia Worsley, the woman he should care about, his betrothed, the woman who would unlock a fortune for him. There was nothing wrong with her, as such.

*But she wasn't Elizabeth.* Though he wished to make them both happy in very different ways, if push came to shove, Jacob knew who he truly cared about.

Lady Romeril may be the one he had to please to fulfill the terms of the codicil, but he was the one who had to live with himself.

"Move," Jacob muttered as he pushed against the side door, but it was not moving.

Indecision tugged at his mind. *What could he do?*

Another strange noise echoed out across the courtyard—a grunt. Jacob looked about but couldn't see another soul.

*And that was strange in itself,* he realized. *Where was everyone? Elizabeth would not have shut up the house and gone away without telling him, would she?*

*The back door.* There was a back door frequented by tradesmen, but this was no time to cling onto his sense of reputation. He had to find out what was going on.

"Hallo there?" Jacob called, pushing open the back door, which was mercifully open. "Anyone at home?"

*Everyone* was at home. The kitchens were in absolute chaos, with footmen rushing around, the cook shouting incoherent orders, and a few gardeners staring in abject terror at a maid, who appeared to be critiquing them for the way they had folded a set of linens.

"What in God's name..." was all Jacob could speak as he took in the chaos.

"Towels, towels!" Mrs. Shaw came into view, her face red and a pile of towels in her arms. "Where are those extra towels?"

The gardeners rushed forward to add their linens to her load, and she rushed out again.

"Get that pot boiling, Evans!" Cook shouted at another footman who looked harassed and sweaty over a fire.

Jacob could feel the tension and panic, so tangible he could almost cut it with a knife. Something had occurred—some accident perhaps, judging by the linens and hot water. *Was a gardener upstairs in bed? Had someone injured themselves?*

“What in God’s name is going on?”

“You are not wanted here,” snapped Elizabeth’s lady’s maid as she pushed a sweaty mop of hair away from her face. “Go away.”

Jacob swelled with indignation. He was hardly a favorite in the household, he knew that, and Holland was probably the servant who disliked him most heartily—but still. She was a servant, and she had been instructed by her mistress, he knew, to treat Jacob kindly as a guest.

“Who is in charge here?” Jacob’s words sounded stilted, but he could see no other way of getting the information from these harried servants.

The cook stepped forward, concern painted across her face. “Me, begging y’pardon, sir, while Mrs. Shaw is upstairs and Mr. Linscott is busy.”

Jacob took a deep breath. Elizabeth’s cook seemed, at the very least, a little more accepting of his presence.

“Thank you,” he said stiffly. “Now, please. Tell me. What is going on?”

The cook looked wretched, and Jacob caught out of the corner of his eye the glare of the lady’s maid.

“Look at me, please, and tell me what is happening,” his voice said firmly. “Is someone injured?”

An invisible hand reached into Jacob’s heart and clenched it tightly. Color drained from his face, and his legs immediately weakened.

“The baby? It...it’s coming?”

Cook’s response was utterly drowned out as a scream, gut-wrenching and echoing through the house, overwhelmed all other noises in the kitchen.

Cook nodded grimly. “Coming, yessir. My lady is upstairs and abed.”

Jacob’s heart was flushed with emotions he never knew were possible to exist in the same soul. Excitement, fear, terror, panic.

His child, their child, was about to try to make its way into the world, and he knew it was not a safe journey.

He was, perhaps, just a day away from meeting his child. It was a heady thought, threatening to overwhelm until another scream echoed through the house.

*Fear. Terror, panic.* Childbirth was a dangerous business, as bad as a battlefield, and he had heard tell of plenty of men who lost not only babes but wives in the birthing bed.

Instincts took over. None of the shouts from the Cook, the lady’s maid, nor the other servants in the kitchens were sufficient to prevent

Jacob from rushing toward the door to the hallway.

“No, wait—”

“You cannot go up there!”

“M’lordship, no!”

Not a single syllable they uttered slowed Jacob’s steps. His desperation forced him forward as the screams from above became louder in the hallway, rolling down the stairs.

*Elizabeth.* He had to be close to her. She needed him. Now she was... another scream rent the air, and Jacob’s stomach dropped. Something was wrong, he knew it. No one screamed like that if all was well.

Halfway up the sweeping staircase, his feet taking in two or three steps at a time, his heart pounding blood through his veins at thrice the normal rate, he knew his son or daughter was coming into the world. He had to be there.

It was not difficult to find her as moans emanated through a door. He strode over, wrenched it open, and a terrible scene met his eyes.

Curtains closed, fire burning in the grate, it felt more like a battlefield than a birthing chamber. It was boiling, all inhabitants sweating as more steaming water was brought in behind him by an irate looking Holland. There was...Jacob swallowed. There was blood across the sheets on the empty bed. *Where was Elizabeth?*

Eyes frantically moving around the room, he saw Mrs. Shaw, the housekeeper, two maids he did not recognize, a woman he assumed was from the village, and Doctor Sanders with his hands covered in blood.

And there she was. His breathing started to slow as he caught sight of Elizabeth in a chair that looked designed for torture. She was naked, she was sweating, and she looked utterly exhausted.

Doctor Sanders, the medical man for all the great and good in society, had been crouched over Elizabeth, but as Jacob stood there, unsure what to do, he rose to his feet and glared at the newcomer.

“Get out of this room this instant!” He did not shout, but his voice was firm. “How dare you come in here, whoever you are!”

“Go to hell,” Jacob said before stepping over to Elizabeth. “I am here.”

“B-But...” stammered Doctor Sanders, staring around the room, waiting for them to support him. “This is most irregular!”

“I know,” snapped Jacob. *Couldn’t the man just do his job, must everyone pontificate?* “But your attention should be on your patient, not me.”

There was a pause, and Jacob did not care whether the physician

replied or not. He was on his knees at Elizabeth's side, her hand in his, and he could see the tiredness creeping over her forehead. She was exhausted. *How long did a birthing take? How long had she been in this insufferably hot room?*

"My lady?"

Elizabeth's gaze had moved to Jacob as soon as he had knelt beside her, but she looked up at Doctor Sanders as she replied, "Lord Westray has been a good friend to me since...since my husband died."

This was not sufficient for the doctor. "Good friend or not, one cannot have any men here, gentlemen or no!"

Elizabeth's focus became sharper. "You are here."

Jacob wanted to cheer—even in the throes and agonies of labor, his Elizabeth was still a far quicker wit than any of these fools! As if anyone could pry him from her side. Not now.

"Elizabeth," he said urgently under his breath. "Elizabeth, I—"

But whatever he was about to say was not heeded. As though responding to something deep within her, Elizabeth started to moan, her chin dropping to her chest and the rest of the room rushing toward her.

"I have more important things to worry about," retorted Doctor Sanders, pushing Jacob aside so he could reach his patient. "If you want to make yourself useful, whoever you are, take this and wipe her brow."

A damp linen was thrust into Jacob's hand. He looked down at it, uncomprehending. *He was being relegated to—to some sort of maid!*

His respect for the maids increased, however, as he saw how hard they worked to serve their mistress. Dipping the linen into the bowl of warm water nearest him, he gently wiped Elizabeth's forehead.

"I am sorry," he whispered as she groaned. "I just could not stay away. I am right here, Lizzy."

His attention was not so enrapt in her that he could not see the raised eyebrows from those in the room, but he did not care. He would endure far worse than shocked expressions to be with her.

She was majestic. Jacob had a passing understanding of labor, in the very basic sense, and he had once seen a foal born on Lady Romeril's country estate. *But this? This was awful. It was criminal ladies were forced to subject themselves to such torture!*

"I am...I am glad you are here," Elizabeth managed after a contraction abated.

He wiped her brow again, feeling her heat through the linen. "How long have you—"

"Two days."

Jacob gaped. "Two...two days?"

Elizabeth did not reply but grabbed his hand as another contraction overwhelmed her, and she started to scream.

"This is it, your ladyship," said Doctor Sanders calmly as he knelt before her. "Push now. Push slowly but with everything you've got!"

"Slowly?" snapped Elizabeth, her expression furious. "Do you have any idea—aarrgghhh!"

Her shout was guttural, taking over her body and causing her to clench Jacob's hand so tightly, he was sure a few fingers were broken.

He did not protest. *How could he, when she was so marvelous?* A warrior, facing a battle like this for two days. He would never underestimate women again!

With a slow, low groan, and encouraging remarks from Doctor Sanders, which made no sense to Jacob, the baby rested in the waiting physician's hands and was immediately placed onto Elizabeth's chest.

"There now," he said with a wry smile. "Now, wasn't that all worth it?"

Jacob thought he was due a good thrashing for speaking like that to Elizabeth, but she did not seem to care. The tears of pain had suddenly transformed into tears of joy. She had released his hand, not that he had noticed.

A baby. A screaming, wriggling, slightly sticky baby.

"A...a baby," he said aloud as maids rushed forward to dry off the child and to wrap their mistress in a blanket.

"I should think so," said Doctor Sanders with his typical sarcasm. "I should be most confused if it was anything else."

"A boy."

Jacob and the doctor turned to look at Elizabeth.

"A boy," she repeated, her smile weary.

Jacob's heart thundered. *A boy. An heir to the Howard line.* The dowager countess would be thrilled—and never leave Elizabeth alone.

*Damn. In his heart of hearts, though, he would never admit it to a soul, he had hoped for a daughter.* A daughter would have been left alone by the bloody Howard family. As it was...

"An excellent birth, if you do not mind me saying so, Mrs. Howard," Doctor Sanders was saying. "You are to be congratulated."

Elizabeth's smile did not disappear. "I know."

Jacob could not stop looking at the little scrunched up face and eyes blinking at the new world. After all these months...he had known, of course, that a baby was coming. But here it was. Here *he* was. *His son.*

Something would always connect them, even if he never acknowledged the boy as his own. *His son. His baby boy.*

Elizabeth sighed heavily. “Jacob Beauvale, meet Elmore Lenskeyn Beauvale Howard.”

Her eyes met his, and in that instant, he knew. She had given this boy—their boy—one of his names. An acknowledgment, albeit a small one, of his role in the boy’s creation—but that would be the only sign that they were in any way connected.

He had considered it before, of course, but it was in that moment that Jacob knew he had to have her. He had to marry her. He had to ensure he was a part of this child’s life for the rest of his life.

*The only bloody thing was how.*





## Chapter Eleven

Elizabeth watched her son nuzzle toward her.

She smiled. She was doing a lot of smiling at the moment. It seemed impossible to have any other expression when she looked at this tiny little miracle. Little Beau. Her tiny marvel she had never expected.

“I know what you want,” she murmured to the baby in his little cot, all lace and trinkets. “Come here, Beau.”

Her son wiggled in her arms as she lifted him and walked over to the sofa. He was so alive, so vibrant. Now he was here safely, she could reflect on the panic that had filled her during those horrendous birthing days.

*What if he was born sleeping? What if something had happened that she could not comprehend, and he...*

Elizabeth felt the weight of Beau in her arms and knew he was safe, but it did nothing to erase the panic of the last few months.

“Here you go, little one,” she murmured, unbuttoning her gown and helping him to latch on. “There you are.”

Beau suckled happily, and Elizabeth leaned back, utterly overwhelmed with joy.

She had never realized in all her two and thirty years that this was possible. How could she? Considered barren, her little son completed her in a new way. Some part of her had been broken, and she had not even known it.

The pain of Beau’s birth had been the settling of her soul.

Her son. Her little baby. Every time she looked at him, her heart ached. There he was, with a scattering of blonde hair and bright blue eyes. Jacob and Elmore were such different gentlemen, and if her babe had taken after his father in looks...

No, Beau was all his mother. Hers, all hers.

She had longed for a child, given up on ever being blessed with one, and now she was holding him in her arms—but he was Elmore Howard’s boy, not Jacob Beauvale’s, as he should be.

Slipping in Beauvale as a middle name had been...scandalous. Not

seemly for a widow, certainly, and she would not be surprised if it gained her a little notoriety until something more dramatic occurred in polite society.

*Her mother-in-law, certainly, would have a few things to say about that.*

No matter what was on his birth registry in the church book, he would always be Beau in her heart.

They would keep it a secret for the rest of their lives: herself and Jacob, and little Beau.

*How much time passed as she nursed Beau, she could not tell. Did it matter?* The world continued to turn, and yet here, in this little corner of Lenskeyn House, her whole world was Beau.

It was only when there was a knock on the door that she remembered that they were not the only two living things in this world.

The door opened, and Linscott came in with red cheeks and averted eyes.

Elizabeth smiled encouragingly. "Tis just my son feeding, Linscott. You do not have to be embarrassed or concerned. 'Tis perfectly natural."

The butler nodded but still kept his face averted. His response was not uncommon, Elizabeth knew. She had heard the mutterings of some of the maids from downstairs and knew they thought her strange. *No wet nurse?* All the ladies of nobility in England and Ireland had a wet nurse...

Well, it was odd, that was all. *Common.*

Elizabeth did not care. Beau was the only child she would ever have, widow as she was, and she wanted to experience everything. Every moment was precious.

"Your guests have arrived."

Forced from her reverie, Elizabeth shook her head as she adjusted Beau on her breast. "No, that is not possible. It is only..."

Her voice trailed away as she turned to look at the carriage clock over the mantelpiece and saw with shock that it was indeed past three o'clock in the afternoon.

She groaned. "And there is no way to stall her, Linscott?"

For the first time since entering the room, the man smiled. "I am afraid to say the dowager countess is most eager to be here. Her carriage has just pulled up, and I am sorry to report it appears she has bought friends."

Elizabeth sighed heavily. *Of course. Why had she expected anything else?*

She had only agreed to the visit so soon after Beau's birth—*Elmore's*

birth, she must remember to call him Elmore—because she would never have a minute's peace until her mother-in-law met her grandson.

Her gaze flickered down to the babe in her arms. *Well. Not precisely her grandson. But the elderly Lady Howard never needed to know that.*

"Well then, I must prepare myself for visitors," she said aloud. "When the dowager and her companions have disembarked and are ready, please send them in—along with tea, some cake, and a bottle of champagne—I know, but they will expect it. I will put B-baby Elmore into his crib so that they can see him."

*Was that a curious glance from Linscott as he nodded and departed?* Elizabeth sighed. She was going to have to get much better at calling her baby Elmore in public. *Or was it safer to just call him Elmore all the time?*

Her heart hardened as she looked down at the child in her arms. *Was this how her mother-in-law had felt all those years ago, looking at her own Elmore? Had she seen the bitterness, the anger, the gambling, the debts in that innocent brow? Was it possible that her own Elmore, with her husband's name, could become such a monster?*

It was mere moments after she had placed Beau into his crib—she had ordered Mrs. Shaw to place one in every room, which had raised some eyebrows but had made it easier to just pop her child down for a nap wherever they were—before the dowager countess swept into the room.

"Where is he?" she said by way of greeting. "Where is my favorite grandchild?"

Elizabeth smiled as two others entered behind her—Albemarle Howard, the Earl of Lenskeyn, and Theodosia, his wife.

Her smile widened as Theodosia replied tartly, "Not for long, I would hope."

The Countess of Lenskeyn placed a hand on her swollen belly. She looked only a few weeks away from giving birth—a woman who should be in confinement. *A cousin for her little B-Elmore.*

"How good of you all to visit me," she said. "Theodosia especially, I had thought you were confined?"

Theodosia did not reply but raised a sardonic eyebrow as she slowly lowered herself onto a sofa.

"She is confined," said the dowager countess smartly.

"And yet, to the untrained eye," Albemarle said with a grin, "it looks as though she has been dragged out of the comfort of her own home, forced to put on a bonnet, and into a carriage to take her out of Bath to see her nephew!"

It was all Elizabeth could do not to laugh. There was something rather wonderful about the way the eldest Howard son was able to speak about his mother with clearly no concern of retribution.

*Would Beau be like that? Would he tease her as a man?*

If only the Earl of Lenskeyn had been around more during her marriage to his younger brother. He was clearly a solid, dependable sort of gentleman. Perhaps if he had not been living on the Continent for over a decade, he could have put Elmore straight.

*Would she then have been happy with him? Would she have never conceived little Beau?*

The dowager countess sniffed. "Of course I encouraged the countess to come. We are all here, save your sisters, and they would not deign to come all the way to Bath for this Season. So we are here. Family, together."

She gave a rare smile to her daughter-in-law—though, to Elizabeth's mind, the smile was for her grandchild only. Her smile broadened as she looked at her eldest son, her pride and joy, and then disappeared as she turned to look back at Elizabeth.

"Well? Where is he then? Where is Elmore's boy?"

Elizabeth was loath to wake up her sleeping babe, but then he had taken so much milk, he was likely to stay in that delightful stupor after a good feed. Picking him up carefully from the crib as his grandmother settled in the largest armchair in the room, Elizabeth placed him carefully in her arms.

She should not have been concerned. It was clear her mother-in-law knew what she was doing with a newborn child.

Elizabeth's heart soared as she took a seat opposite. "He is."

"But..." The older woman hesitated, and her smile became sad. "He does not look anything like him, does he?"

A lump rose into Elizabeth's throat. *Surely, they could not have guessed. They would not be here, in full force, if they guessed...*

"What do you mean?" she managed.

Theodosia snorted. "Come on, Elizabeth, birth could not have exhausted your mind entirely! Look at him, he is the spit of you!"

"All I can see is you," Albemarle agreed. "What was your maiden name again?"

"Sandringham," she said, the lump descending into her stomach.

The Earl of Lenskeyn nodded. "Yes, he is Sandringham all over. Not a whit of Howard in him, sorry Mama!"

The dowager smiled wanly. "At least he is here. You have given the

house of Howard a son, Elizabeth, and I will be forever grateful.”

A wrench of guilt forced its way through Elizabeth’s heart as she watched the grandmother dote on her grandson. *Yes, he was the spitting image of herself. Thank goodness. If he had looked like his father...*

She felt as though she had stolen something from her marital family, something precious. She had given them a son. An heir!

*And yet...*

“What is happening in town,” she said as brightly as she could. “The Season continues, of course. I have not heard any news.”

She looked at her mother-in-law, but the dowager was far too busy cooing over the baby to reply.

Theodosia smiled wearily. “Do not ask me. I have been stuck at home for the last few weeks, waiting for this one to arrive. How on earth did you stand it, Elizabeth? I can hear the laughter and giggles of people passing, and all I wish is to be out there!”

Her husband chuckled. “My dear Teddy, you can barely walk!”

A cushion was thrown in his direction.

Elizabeth could not help but smile. This was what she had missed, what she had hoped for when she had wed Elmore Howard all those years ago. Not just a husband but a family.

“I promise, the baby will be worth the wait,” she said quietly. “You think they will never arrive, and then suddenly, there they are.”

“I certainly hope so,” said Theodosia with a mischievous smile. “The father certainly took his time to arrive, too.”

Elizabeth looked between the pair of them. There was such love there, such understanding; it radiated from them, obvious to all. What she would not give to have that with—but no. *She must not think of Jacob. She had Beau, and he was the one she should focus on.*

“Well, the whole of society is aflutter for weddings, of course,” the earl said with a grin. “Half of them, my wife’s fault.”

“Fault? ’Tis hardly my fault if I am such a good matchmaker!”

“The most exciting one,” continued Albemarle, ignoring his wife’s protestations as two footmen entered the room with tea things, “is Miss Worsley’s wedding, goodness knows why.”

Theodosia sniffed. “That is because you do not pay attention to anything going on around you, you fool. Miss Sophia Worsley was left at the altar—a year ago, maybe two? I cannot recall exactly. This baby of yours is giving me too much grief.”

Her husband laughed. “Why is it always my baby when he grieves you and your baby when you plan their future nuptials?”

The two giggled, and Elizabeth's heart twisted. *This could have been her life if Elmore had not been such a brute. It was strange, bittersweet even, to watch them.*

"Yes, well, Miss Worsley's wedding is highly anticipated, though it's not until the spring," said Theodosia, helping herself to three biscuits.

"And I suppose you will know all about it," came a sharp comment from the armchair. "You know the groom so intimately, after all."

Elizabeth's stomach dropped. There it was, then. The gossip of her and Jacob had evidently increased to such a fever pitch that it had finally reached her mother-in-law, and now she was to be questioned.

If only she had not made herself such a spectacle of gossip. *What could she say?*

"I think most people know of Lord Westray," Albemarle said into the silence.

Elizabeth looked at him with gratitude, and he gave her a small nod before he continued.

"I cannot think of anyone in good society who is not acquainted with Lord Westray," he said airily. "He is very good at offering his carriage to those who do not keep one, and I know that."

"Yes," Elizabeth said gratefully. "Yes, Lord Westray has been kind—as have you all, allowing me to stay here in Lenskeyn—"

"Yes, yes, that is all very well," interrupted the dowager countess with a sniff. "But Elmore Lenskeyn *Beauvale* Howard..."

She allowed her voice to trail away without taking her hawk-like stare from her daughter-in-law.

Elizabeth swallowed. She had known this moment would come, but she had not been prepared for it. How was she to explain her son's name?

A terrible thought struck her. Could—no, surely a servant would not have betrayed her and told the family that Jacob had been here for the actual birth? They would not be so disloyal.

*But remember,* a voice reminded her, *they are Howard servants, not yours. They belong to the house. They belong to the family.*

"I like the name Beauvale."

Elizabeth's gaze snapped to Theodosia, who had just spoken.

Smiling, the heavily pregnant woman reached out for another biscuit. "Naming a child is such a fuss, do you not think, Elizabeth? I have to say, there are not sufficient family names to go around, and so I, too, have been looking into my broad acquaintance for names I like. I suppose that is how you chose Beauvale?"

Elizabeth grasped at the suggestion like a drowning woman. "Yes, yes, that is exactly right. Inspiration comes from the most unlikely of places."

She did not dare look at her mother-in-law.

"Do not get yourself into a flap, Mother," said Albemarle easily, helping himself to a cup of tea. "She gave you that boy, did she not?"

Sudden panic overwhelmed her as the wild thought the dowager may rise and walk away with her son entered her mind. Elizabeth stood and moved toward him.

"No, leave him," protested the older Lady Howard. "I am enjoying time with my grandson."

Unable to protest, Elizabeth sat down uncomfortably. Her presence in Lenskeyn House was dependent on the good graces of the family she had married into, and there was nowhere else to go. If she had a brother, he could have protected her or invited her to live with him.

It was little Beau and her against the world.

"And that is all?" The dowager's words cut through her like a knife. "That is all you have been getting up to with that Lord Westray?"

Elizabeth swallowed, and her voice sounded weak as she said, "Getting...getting up to?"

Wild thoughts whipped through her mind: *of running away, of grabbing her son and taking the carriage they had come in and escaping to... where?*

"He is a very polite and respectable gentleman," Theodosia said curtly. "I had attempted to match him several times, but he was too honorable at the time. Not interested in matrimony then, did not wish to lead on the young ladies. I like him."

Her glare toward her mother-in-law gave Elizabeth the strength to calm her own breathing. *This was not a Mrs. Radcliffe novel.* Her son was not about to be abducted by his grandmother. All she had to do was suffer through another twenty minutes, maybe more, and then they would all leave.

"When I was with child, I would not be caught gallivanting with another gentleman," the dowager said darkly.

And it was at that moment Elizabeth lost her temper. Speaking tartly, she said, "So losing my husband before I give birth to his son is not enough for me—I must be ostracized from all gentlemen in society, too?"

Silence echoed around the room. The dowager was looking at her with slightly narrowed eyes, but this time Elizabeth did not panic or

look away. She met her mother-in-law's gaze firmly.

"Well, I think that is more than enough excitement for one day," said Theodosia smartly. "Help me up, Albie."

"Right you are," her husband said with a grin. "Do we need to call a few footmen?"

They teased each other as Theodosia was pulled upright. Theodosia understood. She was a matchmaker, a mistress of all society, and knew exactly when it was time for a gathering to break up.

"Are you truly tired, Theodosia?" said the dowager wretchedly. She looked down at baby Elmore. "I thought we would stay much longer. There is so much I wish to—"

"Come on, Mother, we have worn out dear Elizabeth, and I am sure we would not want to make her ill," said Albemarle bracingly. "Give the little chap to me."

Elizabeth had not realized how much tension was in her shoulders until Beau was out of his grandmother's arms.

"What a handsome grandson for you," the earl said as he carefully popped the sleeping child into his crib.

The dowager beamed, all sadness forgotten. "He gets that from his father. Elmore was such a handsome baby, he—"

"Your next grandchild needs a rest," her son said forcefully. "Come on, Mother."

The older woman rose in a rush of skirts. "Yes, you are correct. My other grandson, Elizabeth, as yet unborn—"

"Or granddaughter," interrupted the Earl of Lenskeyn, and Elizabeth smiled to see him roll his eyes.

It took another ten minutes or so of gentle conversation and chivvying to get the Howards out into the hall, and when Linscott finally closed the front door, Elizabeth felt as though she had run a marathon.

"Please send Molly to me," she said to the servant, who nodded. "I will be in the garden room."

It felt strangely empty and quiet as she entered without the noise of the Howards, and mere minutes later, Molly, the nursemaid, arrived with a curtsy.

"M'lady?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Please take the baby upstairs for a nap, and then back downstairs in an hour or so for a feeding."

The nursemaid bobbed another curtsy and had disappeared quietly with Beau in her arms before Elizabeth had settled herself on a sofa.

*An hour until Beau's next feed. That would give her almost sixty whole*



*minutes of sleep...*

But it was dark when Elizabeth finally opened her eyes. Evening had fallen, and evidently, the nursemaid had given her more time to sleep.

It was not Molly, however, who was seated opposite her with her son in their arms. It was a gentleman.

*Jacob.*

Elizabeth smiled as she propped herself more upright. "Hello."

Jacob grinned. "I could not stay away. I hope you do not mind—your nursemaid said I could take the baby down, and I thought, as his father..."

His smile only seemed to broaden. Elizabeth, still drowsy from her nap, remembered the words of her mother-in-law.

*"He does not look anything like him, does he?"*

"Three weeks old, who could credit it?" Jacob looked down at his son. "And he's all you, Lizzy, thank goodness."

Joy rushed through her to see them together. *It would be rare, she knew.* As Beau grew older, he would have to be called Elmore, would see more of the world, and become a gentleman of society. And she would have to say goodbye to the child she knew and accept he was a man.

*But not yet. In this moment, he was but one and twenty days old, and the world was still a far-off prospect.*

"I was going to wake you up in a minute," Jacob said. "I...well, I cannot stay long. I have to be back in town for dinner. Sophia will be there."

Elizabeth did not know what prompted her to say it. *Was it the rush of affection for her two boys? Was it the words of Theodosia?*

*"I had attempted to match him several times, but he was too honorable at the time. Not interested in matrimony then, did not wish to lead on the young ladies."*

Or was it the casual mention of Sophia Worsley?

"I wish you would not marry her."

The words echoed between them, words previously unsaid but felt by them both.

Jacob swallowed. "I beg your pardon?"

Elizabeth knew there was no going back. Not now she had spoken. "I wish...I wish you would break your engagement with Miss Worsley. I know she has been left at the altar before, and that is terrible...but it should not force you into a marriage we both know you do not want."

It was a difficult speech to make, and her mouth had gone dry. Jacob had not looked away, but he said nothing.

Eventually, his gaze dropped down to his son. “’Tis incredible, how connected one can feel to a babe in arms. He hasn’t said a word, and yet I know he understands how I feel about him. He doesn’t even need to ask. He knows he will never be left alone.”

Elizabeth tried to keep back the tears threatening to fall. *She had made herself more vulnerable than she could imagine, and that was his response? She knew what Jacob was trying to say—it was hardly subtle—but it wasn’t enough. How could it be?*

“I feel alone,” she whispered.

Jacob hesitated, then rose to place Beau in her arms as he kissed her forehead. “I must go. I will find a way, Lizzy. You need to trust me.”

He was gone before she could reply.

*Trust him.* She could do that, but for how long?



## Chapter Twelve

“What a shame I have another appointment,” Jacob said cheerfully with absolutely no attempt to hide his glee. “I suppose we shall have to continue this conversation another time.”

The glare Sophia shot at him, despite her elegant coiffure and her gown of the latest fashion, was sharp. “And exactly what is this mysterious appointment?”

Jacob bit his lip. *He should have kept his damned mouth shut, as he had done the countless other times he had high tailed it out of Bath.*

Guilt never sat well with him, and the nausea it caused in his stomach made him shift in his seat. *He was not a liar.* He never would be—but that did not mean a man didn’t have secrets.

The last few hours with Sophia and her parents had been...well, tolerable.

It was a terrible thought, but it was true. Mr. and Mrs. Worsley were perfectly pleasant people, and if they had not been continually wittering on about his marriage to their daughter, Jacob was almost sure he would like them.

As they debated the color of napkins, the flowers, and precisely what organ music should be playing when the bride entered the church, Jacob had forced down one yawn after another.

His thoughts could not help straying away from their lists, the map of their wedding reception seating arrangement, and disappearing off to Lenskeyn House.

*Elizabeth. Beau.*

They crowded his thoughts, forcing out any focus on this accursed wedding. *Elizabeth.* She was the most incredible mother he had ever encountered.

Jacob’s jaw tightened as he thought about the birth. He still had nightmares about that day. Anyone who considered motherhood easy had much to learn.

“Jacob!”

He jumped. Sophia’s anger had deepened, if possible, and her brow

was furrowed.

"I-I beg your pardon?"

"I am waiting for an answer," she said icily.

Jacob blinked. "An...an answer. There was a question?"

It was a most unladylike sigh that Sophia gave, but then, Jacob thought ruefully, she had much cause. *He was a complete ass.*

"Jacob, you are never present," said Sophia. "Even when my parents were here, you never pay attention to what—"

"They—they have left?" Jacob looked around and realized, to his astonishment, he and Sophia were alone.

The look Sophia gave him was indescribable. "Where is your head, Jacob? Where are you going so often that it interferes with our planning? What is more important than planning our wedding, our life together?"

Jacob opened his mouth, but no words came out. Usually so conversationally gifted, there were no words to describe his predicament—not in a way Sophia would accept, in any case.

Her shoulders slumped. "And why have you put off this wedding time and time again—you first proposed to me almost a year ago!"

Jacob swallowed. *This was not a desperate romantic plea from a woman who was heartily in love with him, and he could see that.*

No, Sophia's frustrations were far deeper than that. She and her parents had expected a marriage, and now they were starting to wonder whether they would get one.

*Did he love Sophia? Not in the slightest.* Great admiration for her, respect, and he did appreciate her good points. She would make an excellent wife.

He had never lied or fabricated emotions he did not feel. No words of love had slipped his lips, not even during the few times they did engage in a little kissing. There had been no passion on either side.

They knew what was expected of them, and so they performed their duties admirably and would continue to do so once they were married.

*Children and heirs.* Jacob would never tell her he already had an heir of sorts. Beau would never be a Westray, but he was of his blood. The moment he had been born—or at least, once he had managed to get his breath back—he had made a decision.

This extra wealth that came with the codicil. He had never needed it before, never wanted it. But he saw the need now.

Sixteen thousand pounds. Four of that could easily be moved. Sophia would never notice. What were gentlemen for but for wasting money?

That four thousand a year would go to Beau. He would not permit a son of his to exist in the world without some sort of income. It would be invested until he was of age, naturally, and then Beau would have his own fortune, independent of the Howard family.

"Jacob!" Sophia looked exhausted.

Sophia was supposed to be the center of his world. Every minute of the day should be devoted to her, a word he could hardly use to describe his attention on her.

Miss Sophia Worsley deserved better. Throwing her away would be throwing everything away; the chance for respectability, a wife of his own, more children perhaps—and importantly for little Beau, the approval of Lady Romeril and the release of the codicil.

If he thought, for one moment, Elizabeth would marry him...

*"I wish...I wish you would break your engagement with Miss Worsley. I know she has been left at the altar before, and that is terrible...but it should not force you into a marriage we both know you do not want."*

Jacob shook his head as though ridding water from his ears. *No, she had not meant...Elizabeth would not marry him.* How many times had she said that as a widow, she would never marry?

She wished *he would not* marry. That was not the same thing.

Besides, Elizabeth had endured enough gossip and pain throughout her life. That cad of a man, Elmore—she must have had the patience of a saint living with him for half a decade.

If he broke his engagement with Sophia and proposed to Elizabeth, she would say no, and he would be left with neither of them, a total loss of his income, and a whole heap of trouble.

Elizabeth's reputation was already sullied in the eyes of some for choosing to include his name in her son's name. *Beauvale*. His heart skipped every time he thought about it.

*Sophia deserved better. Christ, every woman around him seemed to deserve better, and what was he doing?*

*Moping.*

"It's...it's like you're not even here," said Sophia softly.

Jacob grimaced. *What could he say, other than she was right?*

It was easier to just keep pushing back the wedding rather than face the monster he was becoming. Push it back, push it back, ignore her concerns and her parents' questions, ignore Lady Romeril's pouting irritation of the changing dates, push it back...

*Until Sophia broke it off.*

It was the first time Jacob had admitted his foolish idea, and he was

ashamed immediately. *What kind of a man was he, who could not speak up and say what was on his mind?*

Besides, that damned codicil. The idea that his future bride had to adhere to some strange ruling—that of being acceptable to an elderly lady she had likely as not never met—was abhorrent. Coward, he had never been, but there was no other word for how he was acting at the moment.

*Hands tied by a codicil with ropes he had placed around his own wrists,* Jacob thought bitterly. It was his pathetic desperation to cling to the terms of the codicil that stopped him from just tearing up the rulebook and deciding the fate of his own life—but Lady Romeril would never approve of Elizabeth.

Not that there was anything wrong with her. But a widow. A widow with a baby. No, she would not be considered a suitable bride for the line of Westray.

And if he defied Lady Romeril, refused to wed Sophia—who had already been abandoned at the altar once before—then he would lose so much more than just the good opinion of the woman who had raised him.

*His fortune.* His income, everything he needed to live on, it would all go. Nothing for him, and even more importantly, nothing for Beau. He had to protect them, and it just happened to be his misfortune that the best way to safeguard Elizabeth and Beau was to be apart from them.

Marry Sophia. Get the extra income, and send it to Elizabeth for the care of their child. It was the only way.

None of these words passed Jacob's lips, however. Rising smartly and stepping across the room, he kissed Sophia briefly on the lips.

"Goodbye, Sophia. I will see you in a few days."

"And by then," she said softly as he picked up his greatcoat and top hat from the side where he had abandoned them before, "you will have made the decision?"

Something sharp pierced his heart. "I beg your pardon?"

Sophia sighed, making no attempt to hide her irritation. "Your best man. You need a best man, Jacob."

"Yes, right, a best man," he said hastily, popping his hat upon his head. "Of course."

Sophia shot him a look of disappointment as Jacob skipped down the stairs.

He was late. He had wanted to be with Elizabeth half an hour ago. Two long days had passed since he had last seen them. With Beau only

three months old, even a day could mean he missed something new.

“Carriage, Stewart,” he said aloud as he ruefully thought he would have to tread far more carefully when it came to his intended.

*Sophia was pretty, yes, but she was clever, too. She was unlikely to simply accept these jaunts out into the countryside much longer, even if he was more careful.*

The wedding was in three months. He needed to break it off soon, or something needed to happen, or he would actually find himself standing up at the altar with her.

What was it that made him hesitate? The pressure of society, his hatred of breaking the rules? Jacob had always done what he was told. That was part and parcel of growing up with Lady Romeril. As he had grown, he had been careful, seducing young ladies and ensuring never to see them again.

Today he could escape it all: responsibilities, Sophia, the wedding, Bath itself. As his carriage rattled along the road to London, it was only a few miles before it turned off and started down the lane that led to Lenskeyn House.

Jacob’s fingers twisted in his lap as he watched the countryside go by. These trees and hedgerows were starting to become as familiar to him as the streets of London and Bath.

The door to Lenskeyn House opened as he approached it.

“Your lordship,” bowed the butler.

Jacob inclined his head as he handed the man his greatcoat and top hat. Being named godfather to little Beau—*Elmore, he was Elmore officially, though it rankled his soul*—had certainly helped convince the servants he was here on benevolent business.

“And my lady is?” he said but continued toward the drawing room without waiting for a response. He knew Lenskeyn House so well now; there were only two places Elizabeth would be.

She was not in the drawing room. Jacob did not miss a step but turned and opened the garden room door.

“I am sorry, I left as soon as I—” His voice fell away. The garden room, its tall, expansive windows overlooking the lawn, was empty.

Jacob stopped in his tracks. *It was today they had agreed; he could not have mistaken the date, could he?*

A gurgle and a laugh. They were soft, and Jacob knew them better than any sound in the world, and as soon as he heard them again, he knew where they were.

The staircase was far grander than that of his townhouse in Bath, and

he ran up it with passion giving his feet wings. The happy gurgling grew louder, and as he stepped to the bedchamber where Elizabeth had birthed him, it grew louder still.

"And is that your nose?" came her voice, sing-song through the door. "Yes, it is!"

Jacob could not help but beam as he pushed open the door. *There she was, the woman he loved, leaning over the crib where their son lay on his back, giggling up at his mother.*

"Hello, Beau," he said softly. Lifting him out of the crib with Elizabeth smiling, Jacob held him to his chest and breathed him in.

There was nothing like holding his son, even if he had someone else's damn name.

Elizabeth sat on the bed and said teasingly, "I still don't know whether you come to see him or me."

"Both," Jacob said honestly, stroking his son's cheek as he gurgled away. "Hello, little man. Are you being good for your mother?"

"He is, mostly," said Elizabeth, her voice tired. "But he could be a little terror, and I would never wish him away. Would I, Beau?"

As Jacob cooed over his son and tried to forget there was a real world outside these walls, Elizabeth leaned forward and pulled the bell-rope by the bed.

In less than a minute, the nursemaid arrived.

"Would you mind putting the baby down in his nursery?" Elizabeth said with a smile. "I think I will turn in early after his lordship's visit, and we are trying to encourage the baby to sleep through the night."

The nursemaid curtsied her agreement, reaching for Beau. Jacob instinctively took a step backward, and it was only when Elizabeth cleared her throat that he remembered.

*No one else knew Beau was his son. He could hardly act the protective parent when no one was supposed to know.*

"Here you go," he said happily in an attempt to cover up his faux pas. "Growing every day, is he not?"

The nursemaid smiled broadly as she accepted Beau into her arms. "Yes, little Elmore Howard is a growing lad," she said proudly as she walked out of the door.

Jacob's jaw tightened. *Elmore Howard. To think his son would have to bear that name...the indignity of it!*

"I had no choice, you know."

Jacob turned to look at Elizabeth, whose voice was low. "I know."

"Any other name would have raised suspicion," she said as though



desperate to reassure him. "I had wanted to call him Jacob, but Beauval was the closest I was able to get."

He nodded. It had been an impossible situation, and her idea had been far more impressive than his, which had been simply to pick a random name and damn the Howard family to hell.

"I cannot believe he is over three months old," Jacob said wistfully, looking at the door.

"I cannot believe it was a year ago, almost exactly, that we..."

Elizabeth's voice trailed off, and Jacob turned to look at her with a grin. "Christ, was it really? I remember it so well. I wanted you so badly that night—have done often since then. Sometimes I still cannot believe you let me."

"Do you not remember my husband? I was desperate. I would have said yes to anyone," she jested, a smile growing on her lips.

Jacob laughed and sat on the chair beside the bed. "Well, I should have expected that!"

Elizabeth's smile broadened. "There is only a hint of truth in it. I was desperate—to be touched, to be loved. But since then, I have wanted you—but that's not what I promised myself I would say. You must ignore me."

His grin slowly disappeared, replaced by a look of curiosity. *She wanted him? Elizabeth had never spoken like that to him before. What was this about?*

Even as she opened her mouth to begin speaking again, Jacob had to force himself to focus on her words rather than her loveliness. She was beautiful, and becoming a mother had only increased that. If he was not careful, he would say a few things he should not.

Elizabeth took a deep breath. "Look, Jacob. I have reconsidered."

Jacob waited for more, but none seemed forthcoming. "Reconsidered?"

"Yes," she said. "I...I know you do not want to be seen to take on a son who is not yours. Society must dictate our lives somewhat, I suppose. Marry Miss Worsley and be happy. Stop coming here. You will still see Beau occasionally, for I will arrange it with my butler. You must see this is for the best."

Fury raged through his heart as he had never known before, mingled with a sort of wild disbelief. "You...you no longer want to see me?"

The chair could no longer hold him; he had risen and paced about the bedchamber.

"How do you think I am going to explain your near-constant

presence to our son?" Elizabeth said, a touch of pleading in her tones. "Who are you to him, that you are always here?"

"I am his godfather!"

"Almost every godfather in Christendom barely sees their godchildren, and you know it," she said fiercely. "Jacob, I say this out of no bitterness. It will all be easier, easier for Beau, if we just...we just stop it."

"But surely, one day, we will tell him?" Jacob turned, and he saw the hesitation on her face. "You honestly were going to keep the truth from him?"

"How could I tell him anything else?" Elizabeth looked wretched, unable to meet his eyes entirely. "Society believed his father and I were happy, and I do not wish little Elmore to think I had no regard for his namesake. This is for him, Jacob."

Her appeal fell on deaf ears. *To think he could cease to be a part of his son's life...that Elizabeth could just take him and leave, go anywhere without him—without Beau even knowing he had another parent in the world, thinking about him, caring about him...*

Bile rose in his throat. It was an intolerable thought, and he simply would not countenance it.

And losing Elizabeth? For that was what she was suggesting, even if she did not know it. Removal of his presence from their child would naturally mean he would no longer see her, and the thought wrenched his soul apart.

He could not be separated from them. He loved Elizabeth.

*He was not ready to let go of them, no matter what she said.*

Swallowing, he said as calmly as possible, "I will not simply disappear into the background of our son's life."

Elizabeth's forehead was puckered, and her eyes were downcast. "What would you have me do? I am in an impossible position, and you know it. The gossip about us only increases, and you are still engaged to Miss Worsley!"

"Miss Worsley be damned, I love you!"

The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them, but would he have even tried? There was no point denying it any longer, and it was time Elizabeth knew the truth. *His truth. Their truth.*

Elizabeth was looking at him now as she whispered, "You don't mean that."

A few paces from the bed, Jacob nodded. "I do, and I should have said it a long time ago. I love our son, but my love for you came first. I

just didn't know it."

There was no going back from this, Jacob knew, but he did not care.

"I...I love you, too," Elizabeth spoke with a bashful smile, and it was all Jacob needed to hear.

Moving across the room and clambering onto the bed next to her, Jacob did the only thing he could think of, he kissed her.

The passion stirring inside him, the passion desperate to pour from his lips for weeks and weeks, finally overwhelmed him.

Elizabeth returned his ardor, pulling him into her arms as they sat side by side on the bed, clutching at each other like younglings at their first ball. Jacob almost wept at her sweetness.

And he wanted more. Every inch of him—and some inches more than others—sprang to attention at the very thought. But Elizabeth had given birth not too long ago, and it was a huge demand of her. *Was she ready—or willing—to give herself to him again?*

Jacob broke the kiss and looked into her startling blue eyes, the eyes she had given to their son.

His request did not need words. She understood him immediately, and with only a slight hesitation, nodded.

"I am ready," she whispered, "and...and I want you. But first, lock the door. No one will consider it amiss. I do that if I do not wish to be disturbed at night."

Heart in his mouth, almost unsure whether he had dreamt her reply, Jacob rose quickly and locked the door.

*This was wrong. What he was doing was wrong, but he could not help himself. Mere hours ago, he had been in his Bath townhouse, planning his wedding with another woman.*

*Sophia deserved better. If it came to that, so did Elizabeth.*

Yet, he could not stop himself. Not when this felt so right, after forbidding themselves for so long.

Jacob felt her quiver with anticipation as he returned to the bed and pulled her into his arms, and he understood. This was going to be a new kind of lovemaking, now she was a mother, and she would need all the reassurance he could give her.

Slowly, teasingly, his lips worshipped hers until she moaned softly into his mouth, and he felt her shiver in that indescribable way that told him she was ready for more.

"Slowly, slowly," he whispered, smiling at her reassuringly. "And if you wish to stop, all you have to do is say."

Elizabeth nodded as he reached around and slowly undid the ribbons

keeping her gown together.

“Do...we do need to undress?” Her words were not so much whispered as breathed, almost merely thought.

Jacob stopped. “You do not wish to?”

*What was that emotion furrowing her brow? Was it...shame?*

“I...I am not as I was when you last saw me,” she said eventually, her hands moving to her stomach protectively.

Jacob looked her carefully in the eyes as he continued to undress her, kissing her lips, her neck, and her cheeks.

When she was finally entirely naked, lying on the bed, Jacob took her in.

“You were beautiful,” he said quietly. “And now, you are even more so. Yes, even better. Every line,” and he moved a finger along the marks where her skin had stretched, “was for our son, and I love you for it.”

It did not take him long to strip himself, and then he was with her, pulling her into his arms, loving her as only he knew how.

As he stroked his fingers inside her, he was careful. This was new ground, something he had never experienced before, and he was honored to share it with her.

Gently bringing her to climax, he knew she needed to feel pleasure again, to trust her body. To trust herself that she had made the right decision in opening herself to him.

“Jacob, Jacob, yes!” Elizabeth tried to bite down on her words as her entire body rocked with pleasure, but she could not help it. She clung to him, an anchor in a storm, and Jacob’s heart broke. *He would do anything for this woman. Anything.*

His desire reached a fever pitch as he slipped inside her, and he knew he had come home.

Loving her, teasing her breasts, capturing her mouth just when she least expected it with his own—Jacob lost himself in the ecstasy that was loving Elizabeth.

Only when she had exploded around him several times did Jacob finally let himself go, and as he rocked into her and finally crested into her—that was when he knew he would never be able to live without her.

They lay together, Elizabeth in his arms, and felt their bodies connect in a way they had never known.

“I want you to stay here,” were the first words Elizabeth managed to say. “Here with me. Tonight.”

Jacob nodded. Of course he would obey any command, any request.

He would do anything Elizabeth asked.

He never wanted to leave her again.



## Chapter Thirteen

The instant Elizabeth opened her eyes, she reached out for Jacob Beauvale.

The movement was so instinctive she barely thought about it, despite the fact this had been the first time Jacob had stayed overnight. The memories of his body moving against hers, of the loving way he looked at her, all of her, echoed in her mind.

She smiled, blonde hair tangled and untamed. *He loved her.* After all these weeks and months wondering, holding back her desires, in the end, it did not matter, for he loved her. *And she loved him.*

The strange thing was, there was still so much unspoken between them, so much unresolved. *How were they to be together?* Jacob had not said a word about Miss Worsley. Elizabeth had not thought to ask. *A gentleman does not clamber into bed with one woman whilst still intending to maintain his engagement to another...did he?*

No. Jacob would not have said he loved her, *made* love to her, and stayed by her side all night if he did not have loyal intentions toward her.

Elizabeth sat up straighter, eyes blinking in the darkness. It was as though she had dreamed the entire thing.

A prickle of concern tightened around her heart. As her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness, she noticed her bedchamber door was slightly ajar. When Jacob had left, he had evidently not locked it.

So why had the nursemaid not moved Beau back in with her? It was how they had always done it; giving Elizabeth the first part of the night to sleep and the second half a chance to suckle her child.

Heart starting to flutter painfully, Elizabeth found her breathing more labored. *For the first time in his short life, she did not know where her son was.*

Perhaps the nursemaid had not bothered to bring him. Perhaps Beau had, for the first time, slept through the night. It was not impossible.

But it did not ring true to her heart. A terrible thought, one she was attempting to ignore, was starting to shout louder in her mind.

*Could Jacob...would Jacob have taken Beau?*

Where would they go? How would he explain the sudden presence of a baby in his life to those in town? Or wouldn't it matter? Could Jacob have just grabbed Beau, bundled him into his carriage, and made off for his London residence?

*This was madness*, Elizabeth told herself as she rose from the bed and, with shaking fingers, reached for her dressing gown. Panic was hardly a reasonable response. She loved Jacob, and he was, after all, Beau's father.

*She needed to stay calm*. Her fingers fumbled at the cord around her dressing gown as she attempted to tie it.

*Calm thoughts*, she scolded herself as she abandoned all attempts to tie up the dressing gown and paced toward the door.

*Beau could be anywhere in the house. Maybe he had not settled, and his nursemaid had taken him downstairs—that could be it. Perhaps—*

As she rushed down the staircase, Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief before she had even reached the bottom step. She could already hear the happy gurgling of her baby.

Following the sounds of the giggling, Elizabeth crept her way through the sleepy house and eventually found herself in the kitchen.

"My lady!" Molly, the nursemaid, smiled in surprise to see her mistress down in the servants' quarters. "I do apologize if I woke you."

"Is Beau quite well?" was Elizabeth's only response.

The nursemaid, a stout woman of over fifty, nodded with a smile as she removed a small saucepan from the heat.

"I knew you would not mind if I availed myself of a little milk," she said. "I thought Elmore looked hungry this morning and, as he is now coming up to four months, I thought milk and water would do him good. I can do you some warm milk if you would like."

She added the last sentence as she took a closer look at Elizabeth. Elizabeth ignored the hint of exhaustion in her eyes and reached for her child.

As she pulled Beau into her arms and felt the comforting weight of him, she closed her eyes and forced down the tears.

*It was madness, madness to allow such panic to rise in her soul so quickly—but the thought, the very idea that he could have been taken from her!*

"Th-Thank you," she managed to say without her voice cracking. "That was an excellent idea, Molly."

The nursemaid smiled happily. "Well, if I don't know how to look after a child after all these years, I wouldn't be worth my salt, would I,

m'lady?"

Elizabeth shook her head, unable to speak as she clutched her child. *Well, that explained the second mystery of the morning, but the first was still unsolved.*

*Where was Jacob?*

"There..." Elizabeth swallowed before attempting to phrase the question. A few maids were starting to come downstairs, tying their aprons with sleepy faces—eyes widening in shock as they saw their mistress in their kitchen. "There was nothing amiss with my bedchamber this morning, was there?"

The nursemaid was concentrating on pouring the warm milk and water. "Amisss? No, m'lady, but if I am honest, I only peeked my head in to see whether you were awake or no."

Elizabeth's stomach twisted. *Peeked in? Did that mean...had she seen Jacob? How would she explain?*

"And right in the land of nod, you were," Molly said happily. "I would say you were fair petered out yesterday. Did you sleep well, m'lady?"

Unable to speak, Elizabeth only nodded. *Thank goodness.* Jacob must have departed far earlier than she had thought. It still did not explain why he had disappeared in the middle of the night, not after such a wonderful evening.

"Ah, my lady, there you are."

Elizabeth turned, Beau still in her arms, to see her butler smiling. "Linscott."

"Good morning, my lady, and young master," he said with a bow.

Elizabeth had to work to keep from laughing. Of all her servants, it was Linscott who had surprised her the most after Beau's arrival.

Though still formal, the arrival of a new Howard—albeit one who could barely hold up his own head—had wrought the greatest transformation on her butler. The older man was besotted with him.

Elizabeth remembered something the nursemaid had said. Linscott had been married years ago and had a daughter—but she had died, tragically, in childbirth.

"Good morning," she said.

"I wished to let you know that your guest has just gone to check on his horse," said the butler smoothly.

It was fortunate that at that very moment, Molly had reached out for Beau. Elizabeth almost dropped him into her arms.

"My...my guest?"



Linscott nodded. "Yes, Jacob Beauvale, Lord Westray."

Elizabeth could hardly breathe. A few of the undermaids were looking round most curiously, and little wonder. *Their mistress had that gentleman stay last night—and no one else knew?*

"Lord W-Westray?" she stammered.

"Yes, I spoke with him this morning after discovering him in the Japanese room, and he explained everything," said the butler smoothly. "He explained how, after a late conversation with you, he decided it was too late to return to Bath, and you kindly offered him the use of the spare room. That is right, isn't it, my lady?"

Heart thoroughly exercised for the day, Elizabeth grasped at the excuse. "Yes—yes, Lord Westray did not think a long ride would be a good idea. The Japanese room. Yes."

*He had been clever*, Elizabeth realized. Expecting servants in the early hours, Jacob must have crept out of her bedchamber and found the furthest one from hers.

*Anything to alleviate suspicion. What an outstanding explanation—she certainly would have struggled to think of a better.*

"Yes, that is precisely what happened," she said aloud, perhaps too firmly. "Thank you, Linscott."

"Not at all, my lady, not at all," said the butler with a smile. "Shall I serve breakfast now?"

Elizabeth's stomach gurgled as she realized just how hungry she was. *Why, with all the distraction that Jacob had proved to be last night, neither of them had had dinner or supper.*

"Yes, breakfast would be excellent—and I will take Elmore in with me," she said, reaching for her son.

"I will carry the milk and water up for you now, my lady," the nursemaid started to say, but Elizabeth cut across her.

"Thank you, and then you may go and rest. You must be exhausted."

Molly shrugged with a grin. "You know, you would think so, being up so much at night, but actually—"

"I insist," said Elizabeth firmly as she started walking toward the kitchen door. "Thank you all. Carry on."

It was with a slightly imperial look that she managed to stride out of the kitchen. It was only when she was halfway across the hall that she remembered she was only wearing her nightgown and her untied dressing gown.

*Well, the servants were not her own, and most of them thought her rather eccentric anyway.* Why not give them even more cause to think she was a

strange one?

Seating herself at the head of the table, Elizabeth saw Linscott had once again been impressively expedient. Evidently, taking the servants' corridor, which was shorter than the route she had walked, the breakfast things were all lined up on the sideboard, ready for her to help herself.

She looked into the deep blue eyes of her child, and everything became right with the world.

"Hello, young sir," she whispered. "You gave me quite a scare this morning. I hope you know that."

Beau chuckled happily, and Elizabeth smiled. There was something so wonderful, so unique about holding her child. He started to nuzzle toward her, and she acted instinctively, moving so he could feed.

*So, where was his father? He must still be around, somewhere, if he was caring for his horse. What did he intend to do—had Linscott told him about breakfast?*

"There you are," came that reassuring voice she knew so well.

Jacob kissed her on the forehead before taking the seat next to her.

The love she felt for him—so overpowering, it was almost painful. The lack of his presence had a far greater effect on her than she realized, and it was only when he returned that she knew just what she lacked when he was gone.

Love was a strange and new emotion. She had believed herself to love Elmore, especially at the beginning. Stolen kisses at the bottom of staircases at the end of balls, snatched conversation with no chaperones in Sydney Gardens, long teasing stares...

Yes, that had felt like love, or what she thought love should be. But it hadn't been. Devotion, perhaps—or desperation.

She had wanted to be in love. She had been young, but not young enough. She had needed to wed, and there was a gentleman paying her much attention. Certain he would care for her, she had married him with high expectations, which had been utterly abandoned within a year.

*But Jacob...*

This was different.

"Good morning," he said with a mischievous smile. "And after such a wonderful evening, how could it not be good?"

"Good morning, indeed," she replied with a chuckle.

"Well," Jacob said impressively. "I did not expect that."

Elizabeth did not need to ask what he referred to. "Did you not?" she

replied archly.

Her lover rose from his seat almost immediately and moved over to the sideboard, piling up a plate with eggs, bacon, and potatoes.

"You are surely not going to eat all of that?"

Jacob turned with a look of surprise. "What, me? Of course not. This is your portion. We need to keep you healthy."

He plonked the laden plate before her, and she laughed. "You cannot expect me to eat all that!"

Joining her with his own equally laden plate, Jacob shrugged. "Why not? The real question is, after our evening last night, what does this all mean. For us?"

Elizabeth swallowed as she stroked the head of their child. "I have been asking myself the very same question. We have done things in a rather backward way, have we not? Made love, made a child, and only now are starting to understand how...how we feel about—"

She broke off as the breakfast room door opened, Linscott bringing in a silver tray.

"Coffee and tea, my lady," he said formally. "Shall I stay to pour, or would you like to help yourselves?"

"I think we will manage—thank you, Linscott. That was kind of you," said Jacob with a nod.

Elizabeth saw her butler give a strange look before he bowed and left the room. *Was it...was he pleased?*

Well, it had been a long time since a man had spoken kindly to her servants. Elmore was notoriously rude to them.

Only when the door closed behind the butler did she continue, "How we feel about each other."

Jacob poured out a cup of tea with a little milk just as she liked it before he spoke again. "Fairytale rarely happen, you know."

Elizabeth swallowed. *What was he trying to tell her?* "I know, yet I still feel as though I am living in one. Nothing seems real. It all seems so strange."

*How could she put it into words?* It was impossible to shape her wild thoughts. She would just have to trust Jacob would once again look into her soul.

"In some ways, if I had known all that would happen after I went to your home in Bath to collect that debt..." Jacob's voice trailed away.

Elizabeth swallowed. *Surely Jacob would not go against his own heart and decide to continue with his engagement to Miss Worsley?* Why would he stay here, continue to bed her, if he was just going to keep walking

along the path he was on?

She needed to say something. She was a widow, that was true, but that did not mean she had no voice. "What happens next?"

"Breakfast, I suppose," Jacob said airily. Once he saw Elizabeth's glare, he raised his hands in surrender. "I have no idea. This is...well, 'tis all far more complicated than you could ever know. I will explain in time."

Beau pulled away, and Elizabeth lifted him up with one hand while covering herself with the other. Gently patting him on the back, she tried to swallow down the confusion.

Jacob was nothing like Elmore. She knew that, but learning to trust a gentleman was still new to her. She wanted to believe him. She wanted to believe *in* him. But how could she, when he made no move to break his engagement with Miss Worsley?

"You know your own business best, I am sure," she said slowly.

Beau gurgled and hiccupped.

A genuine smile split Jacob's face. "Here, let me take him."

The scents wafting up from her plate were tantalizing. Handing over their son to his father, she watched as Jacob played with Beau. Her heart twisted.

They were not a normal family, not by any means. But that did not matter. They were still a family.



## Chapter Fourteen

If he was going to hide his yawns, Jacob needed to do much better than that. *If only he was not so bored.* If only there was something interesting going on—but of course, he was with Miss Sophia Worsley, and that could only mean one thing.

*Wedding planning.*

He was a fool to have agreed to it. He should have known, after his late night the day before with Elizabeth—and *what a night it had been*—that he was not sufficiently rested to put up with this nonsense. But it barely mattered. Sophia was doing all the talking about what she expected from him, and he simply agreed with everything she wished.

A twist of shame curled around his heart. *If he was any sort of man, he would be telling Sophia right now that there was no point in going on with this wedding talk.*

He knew what he had to do. There was no thought of continuing on with this engagement, none at all. He had known that the moment he had held Beau over breakfast, talking with Elizabeth, laughing with her.

*Like a family.*

It was not something he had ever sought, and yet when it had fallen into his lap, so to speak, there was only one thought in his mind.

*He would never let this go.* This was his opportunity to be happy, codicil be damned. *What did he need money for, really?* What good were guineas and shillings if you could not be with the ones you loved?

They would get by. Elizabeth surely had some sort of dowry, and if it meant living in genteel but respectable poverty, so be it. That was what he wanted. *They* were what he wanted.

Not this damned wedding planning.

Another yawn attempted to surface, but Jacob pushed it down. *This guest list could not take the rest of the day to debate, surely?*

“Now, we must have the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire,” Sophia said decidedly, seated opposite him in her parents’ drawing room.

Jacob raised an eyebrow. “They are the very top of society, you know, hardly my realm. What makes you think they will accept our

invitation?”

His bride-to-be smiled. “Actually, I am a rather close acquaintance of the duchess. I would not say we were intimate, far from it, but still...we move in the same circles.”

Against his will, Jacob was impressed. There was still much he did not know about Sophia, had never bothered to ask. He had not cared enough to find out, but the more details she slipped into conversation, the more he realized that it was perhaps she, and not he, who had the better connections.

“Fine, add them to the list if you wish,” he said casually. *What did it matter? These damned invitations were never going to be sent, anyway. Still, best to play the part.* “But you may wish to reconsider others on the guest list. We are going to have to be careful. The church will only fit so many people.”

Sophia did not agree. “No, I believe ’tis down to the guests to sort themselves out. I am sure if they just bunched up a bit, they would all fit in the church. *Our* concern is the invitations. Now. The Earl of Marnmouth.”

Jacob sighed. *Was this trial never to end?* He had promised himself he would speak with Sophia once her parents left the house—it would be easier that way, he reasoned, and he would only have to face one sobbing Worsley rather than three—but they were still pottering about, coming in and out of their drawing room to beam at their daughter and her intended.

It all felt wrong. He should have said something sooner.

“A nice man, Marnmouth,” Jacob said hastily, seeing a glare on Sophia’s face. “I have dined with him a few times. Again, a little out of our—”

“Excellent,” said Sophia decisively. “He will know plenty of other guests then. That is always a worry at a wedding. You do not wish to have too many individuals there alone. I have made sure Miss Emma Tilbury is invited naturally.”

Jacob sighed. He was hardly the one to spread gossip around, but it had happened almost a year ago now. *Surely Sophia had heard?*

“I do not believe that to be a good idea,” he said tactfully.

Sophia looked up from her list. “Why on earth not?”

“Because...well, you can have one or the other, but you cannot have both.”

She leaned back in her seat and examined him closely. “I would have thought an earl would appreciate having his mistress also in attendance.

At least he will have one intimate acquaintance at the reception.”

Jacob shook his head. “You must have heard the gossip, Sophia—if not, you must be the only one who hasn’t!”

Her forehead creased. “Gossip? No.”

Jacob wondered how best to put it. He was not usually the one sharing salacious news, but it could not be helped. *God forbid they see each other.*

Only then did he remember that this was an imaginary wedding. He was not going to let it go ahead, so what did it matter?

“If you want both of them, invite both of them,” he said heavily. “But as you have not heard, yes, Miss Tilbury *was* the Earl of Marnmouth’s mistress. He put her aside almost a year ago. The way I hear it, he got tired of her.”

Sophia looked horrified. “What? That is terrible. That a man could just put her aside like that, think nothing of her? ’Tis a scandal.”

Jacob was forced to think of Elizabeth. In some ways, he was no different from Marnmouth. *What had he done? Taken her jewelry as payment for a debt, bedded her, and then put her aside to plan a wedding with Sophia.*

Guilt seared across his heart, but there was nothing he could do about it. He could not take it back. All he could do was change the future—his future.

His gaze met Sophia’s, and she smiled. No passion rose in his heart. He felt a shadow of what he felt for Elizabeth.

The codicil was simply not worth it.

*Damn the codicil, damn Lady Romeril, and damn matrimony at large.*

But Beau. That little mite would need a fortune, and his mother could not give one to him.

Jacob glanced at Sophia. He did not love her, but perhaps he was making a mistake thinking of breaking off this engagement. He could still continue to see Elizabeth, couldn’t he? He was doing so now, and no one suspected a thing.

Marriage to Sophia would give him the funds to support Elizabeth and their child. And, his stomach twisting at the very thought, any other children.

“Well, we have almost finished one side of the paper,” his prospective bride was saying, turning over that leaf. “Just four more sides to go, and we’ll be halfway through reviewing the guest list.”

Jacob stifled a groan. *Were all weddings boring? Or would he feel more interested in the whole accursed affair if it was Elizabeth, and not Sophia,*

*who sat opposite him?*

A vision of Elizabeth walking up the aisle toward him, bouquet in her hands, and veil over her eyes, spun into his mind.

“I said, are you listening to me?”

Sophia’s snap was evidently intended to make him focus, but Jacob merely smiled. “You know, I have always considered you rather rebellious, Sophia.”

The quip had been intended to make her smile, but for some reason, a frown creased her forehead.

She threw the list down onto the floor between them. “Fine. Fine! If you think I am so rebellious, I will say what I have been putting off for weeks—months, even!”

There was no hysteria in her tone, just exasperation, and Jacob could not help but feel intrigued. *Was it possible that Sophia had been regretting their decision all this time and had just not said anything because she believed him to be in love with her?*

*Was the solution to all his problems about to present itself?*

“Say what?”

Sophia took a deep breath. “Rebellious? Me! You are far more rebellious, Jacob. Fathering a child with a widow!”

Jacob’s heart went cold. *No. No, it was not possible. It was impossible that Sophia could know—how could she?*

He had been so careful. His pockets had been somewhat emptier of late, he had bribed so many of his servants and Elizabeth’s.

The child did not even look like him! True, Beau had taken far more after his mother than his supposed father Elmore—but Elizabeth had named him after her late husband. She had been careful, at every turn, to demonstrate her sadness at the loss of her husband, despite the relief he knew she felt.

Even the dowager countess, firebrand that she was, had accepted little Elmore. He was such the image of his mother, no one had any reason to doubt his parentage.

*No one could possibly know the truth.*

But Sophia looked triumphant as she continued, “Oh, you think you are so clever, Jacob Beauvale. Do you not think the whole of society knows where you go? Do you think the gossip does not murmur around you, guessing at just how long your liaison has been going on?”

“N-No,” Jacob managed, sounding like the fool he was. “No, that is not—”

“You and Elizabeth Howard,” Sophia almost spat, sparks in her eyes.



"I know about the two of you and your son."

Jacob swallowed. *He had to take back control of this conversation.* "How could you possibly know? Every step was taken to..."

His voice trailed away as the fire disappeared in Sophia's eyes, and she slumped back in her seat.

"I did not know for sure," she said in a low voice. "Not until this moment."

Jacob could have kicked himself. He had never considered himself the brightest spark in the box, but he had always managed to get by with the brains he had.

Now he had utterly landed himself in it. A secret kept for over a year, now out because of his stupidity.

Sophia was watching him, glaring as though she might launch herself at him and beat him.

"It was all before I had even met you properly," Jacob said, words rushing out as fast as they could. "Before you and I—"

"And you have not seen her since?" Sophia cut across him. "Try to tell me that with a straight face."

Shame poured into Jacob's soul. He knew he deserved to feel this way. He had never wished this to happen.

Now Sophia had the power to ruin not only him but all three of them. Elizabeth and Beau. Their reputations could be over. And Beau not even four months old.

Jacob looked up at his betrothed and realized with a sinking feeling he simply did not know her well enough to predict what she would do with this information.

*Would she use it against him?*

He swallowed. "I should have told you."

"You should never have proposed to me in the first place," she said curtly. "A child, Jacob! What did you think you were doing with me, all these times we have sat here and planned a future you will not commit to?"

"I did not know at the time," he said wretchedly. "I...I proposed to you before I knew Elizabeth was with child."

Sophia threw up her hands. "As though that makes everything all better! Jacob Beauvale, you absolute fool, why did you not break it off then, when we had been engaged but a few days—before the announcement was put in *The Times*?"

Jacob just stared helplessly. He did not know. If he had thought differently, then perhaps things would have been different.

"After you found out you were to be a father, after spending time with her even in her confinement, being there at the birth!" Sophia shook her head as Jacob looked in shock. "Yes, I heard about that. Why did you not make the decision to be with her?"

Jacob tried to marshal his thoughts. "Do...do you wish to end our engagement, then?"

It was the only spark of hope he could see, and it was close. *If he could just encourage Sophia to break the engagement herself...*

"End our engagement? Far from it. We will move the date forward."

Jacob stared, unable to comprehend her words. "Move—move it forward?"

He knew nothing about women, and this was proof. Sophia had known about Elizabeth and Beau—Elmore, to her—this entire time, and yet she still wished to move forward with their wedding.

This was madness. They were not in love, and this knowledge was her perfect excuse to back out of the engagement, head held high, and find someone else.

"You called me a rebel," said Sophia bluntly. "And yes, I suppose in some ways I am. But not like this. Not like this, damn you! I have no wish to be shamed or shunned for being left at the altar again, because mark my words, that is what you are doing."

"The wedding is weeks away," Jacob protested.

"We have been planning this wedding for almost a year, you dolt! Everyone in society is wondering why we have not tied the knot, and I am being asked very awkward questions—but it is you who has been putting it off, and because of that woman!"

Jacob swallowed. *How Elizabeth would feel being termed 'that woman,' he could guess.*

Sophia leaned forward. "I have already borne the shame of a broken engagement, and I am not getting any younger. You have already wasted a year of my life planning this afflicted wedding! I just want to get this over with. We will learn to live with each other. In time."

It was impossible not to laugh at this pronouncement. "Surely you cannot mean that!"

*This was ridiculous. No one had to marry anyone! This was England, for God's sake.*

That damned codicil. That was where this had all started, and in a way, that was how it would all end. The funds for Beau, for him and his mother. He would only secure them by marriage to a woman Lady Romeril approved of, and she had made it clear that Miss Sophia

Worsley was that woman.

*Was it possible that marriage to Sophia would be the most selfless thing he had ever done?*

Beau could not help the circumstances of his birth. That was Jacob's fault, and now he had the chance not only to give him the security he so desperately needed but to prevent Sophia from attacking him with her bare hands.

She was still glaring. "So I tell you this, Jacob Beauvale. If our engagement is broken—if you break it...everyone will know. I will tell everyone about Elmore's true parentage."

Cold fury rushed through Jacob's lungs, but there was nothing he could do about it. *Who would believe him when Miss Worsley was so respected? Friends with the Duchess of Devonshire, so innocent she had not even realized Marnmouth had cast off his mistress near a year ago.*

The shame would permeate to Elizabeth, and he would not allow it.

He would have to give her up. It was for her own good, though he doubted she would ever see it that way. It was the most significant sacrifice he would ever make, and no one but those who it hurt would ever know.

Jacob nodded curtly. "Fine. Have it your way, damn you. We will be married."



## Chapter Fifteen

Elizabeth looked up in excitement as she caught sight of a top hat out of the corner of her eye—but the gentleman who had just entered Sydney Gardens was not Jacob. Even from this distance, she could tell. He had gray whiskers and walked with a cane, and as he grew closer, she saw he was quite an old man.

Her heart sank, but it could not sink too low. Not now she knew how they felt about each other.

*“Miss Worsley be damned, I love you!”*

It had been—what, three days since she had last seen him? *Three days too long.* It was difficult being apart from the man you loved due to society’s expectations.

Elizabeth shook her head as though it would rid her mind of doubt. She was so much more to him than a mistress, she was sure. Lover, perhaps. *Future wife*, a part of her whispered in hope.

Whatever they were to each other, they were parents, and as Beau cooed in his pram beside her, Elizabeth leaned against the bench.

Before now, Jacob had just arrived at Lenskeyn House whenever he pleased. It had not worried her. She had never expected any other guests, and so they were usually left to their own devices.

The elderly gentleman passed by her, nodding as she inclined her head. She forgot, sometimes, cooped up in Lenskeyn House, that there was an entire town just a few miles away, full of people and their hopes and dreams.

*“And who is the cleverest little boy in the whole world?”*

Elizabeth smiled as Molly touched Beau’s nose as explosive giggles erupted from the pram. *Her son. The one who had been waited for all these years.*

And now, his father had requested to see them both, and in public, too. Surely the only reason he could have asked her here...was to propose. Making it here would give their rather bizarre courtship a sort of balance. Finally, they would be able to spend time together. Perhaps, in the years to come, they would even change Beau’s name.

"The cleverest little boy," the nursemaid smiled over the pram. "The cleverest little Howard in all the world."

Elizabeth's smile became more stilted. *Well, perhaps not that far.* She doubted whether society, let alone the dowager countess, would ever accept the youngest Elmore Howard becoming Elmore Beauvale.

But still. Jacob would be his father in all but name, and that was what mattered.

"Full of flighty things, isn't it?"

Elizabeth jumped at Molly's words as she looked out over Sydney Gardens.

"Yes, full of young things just looking for their next gown or jest," said the nursemaid with an approving smile. "Ah, we were all young once. I suppose there will be plenty of hopes for engagements in a few months, as the Season approaches."

Her heart twisting, Elizabeth nodded. It was strange, one's happiness coming at the cost of another's misery. Miss Sophia Worsley had not been on her mind much, but now as she sat here on the bench, waiting for Jacob to make his addresses to her, she could not help but feel sorry for her.

True, she had not heard any news of the broken engagement, but undoubtedly the Worsleys wished to keep it quiet. It was understandable, especially as this would be the second poor Miss Worsley would endure.

Elizabeth bit her lip. *It was hardly her fault, after all. It was no one's fault.* Nobody could be blamed for the strange situation they found themselves in, and she would ensure not to rub salt into the wound.

No, her wedding to Jacob would be small. No fanfare, just something quiet so they could begin their lives as a family.

A gurgle erupted from the pram, and Elizabeth smiled. Her heart swelled for love of Beau as it had never done for anyone before.

Loving a child was utterly unique. There was nothing like it, and had she been asked to describe it to a single soul, she could not have done it. Not even to Jacob.

That man. She had wished for a child for so long, prayed, given up all hope, and known in her soul she would never have that divine pleasure of creating life.

And then Jacob had stormed into her life, furious at first against her husband, and she...she would never be the same again.

The garden gate swung open, and her gaze lifted, but it was not Jacob. This time, a trio of ladies, all about her own age, came through

into the gardens, all speaking loudly and surely not listening to a word the others were saying.

“Do you have the time, Molly?”

The nursemaid pulled at the chain around her neck and looked at her pocket watch—a gift, she had once told Elizabeth proudly, from a previous family she had served. Fourteen children over eighteen years. Elizabeth had shuddered at that. *One was quite enough to be getting on with.*

“Just past three o’clock, my lady,” said the nursemaid.

Elizabeth nodded. She would just have to contain her impatience, that was all. Jacob would be here soon; it was he, after all, who had set the time and day of this meeting. Then they could walk, he would propose, and she would finally be able to kiss him in public without causing an outcry.

*Well, possibly.* She was still a widow, and though she had now moved into her lavender widow’s clothing, she was still officially in mourning. But marriage in mourning was not impossible. She would make it possible.

*And then they would find a house, not in Bath nor London, far from the horrors of gossip, and they could raise Beau and any more children that came their way. They would be so happy, and—*

“Good afternoon.”

Elizabeth’s heart swelled. She knew the owner of that voice. He was standing directly behind her, and she smiled broadly as she twisted to greet him. “Good after-noon.”

Her voice had faltered, but she managed to complete the sentence. Jacob looked...well, *awful* was the only word she could think of.

Gone was the carefree smile. Gone was the cheerful look, that sunny disposition which never seemed to disappear.

Jacob did not look happy. *He barely looked like Jacob.*

“We need to talk, privately,” he said in a low voice with a glance at Molly.

Fear clutched Elizabeth’s heart. Something was wrong, that was plain to see, and yet Jacob had still come here to see her. That could only mean that the something wrong was associated with her. *Perhaps with Beau.*

Whatever had plagued him, she was sure it would bring unhappiness to them both. But she could not inquire yet. She had to ensure their conversation was completely private.

Turning to smile at Molly, she said, “You know, I believe Beau would

appreciate a walk around Sydney Gardens. Something to settle him. Would...would you please take him while I rest here? Lord Westray will entertain me.”

Not the cleverest of ruses, Elizabeth knew, but she could barely think. Jacob’s voice had been so low, so depressed.

*“We need to talk privately.”*

*What could he possibly say that was so terrible?*

Thankfully, Beau’s nursemaid smiled and saw nothing wrong. “Of course, my lady. Beau could do with a nap as it is, and it will get my old bones moving. Your lordship.”

She bobbed a curtsey before she left, and Elizabeth saw that this was one servant who did approve of Jacob.

After watching the pram disappear around a corner, her heart twisting at the very thought that Beau was not within instant reach, Elizabeth took a deep breath and gestured that Jacob should join her on the bench.

He did so, but after hesitation. He appeared reluctant to get too close to her—which, Elizabeth reminded herself, *was perhaps not such a bad thing*. They did not wish to attract gossip, after all. They would be notorious enough when their engagement was announced, without additional attention.

“What is wrong?” she asked.

There was silence, and when she turned to look at him, she was stunned to see tears in his eyes. Jacob could barely speak. He opened his mouth twice, but no words came out.

Terror gripped Elizabeth, making each breath painful. *Clearly something awful had happened, something utterly unforeseen*. The only thing she could think of was that someone had died.

She reached for his hand, taking it in hers, but Jacob pulled away.

“No, not here. Not ever again.”

If she had thought herself concerned before, it was nothing to what she felt now.

Barely able to breathe, she said, “What...in Heaven’s name, Jacob, what do you mean? You cannot possibly mean that.”

Jacob took a deep breath and finally managed to speak. “Christ, Elizabeth, I almost did not come. I still cannot believe I am saying these words—but I must say them.”

“What are you saying?” Elizabeth whispered. All hopes of her happily ever after seemed to be crashing down around her, and she could not understand why, how—*what had she done to deserve this?*

"I...I cannot break the engagement with Miss Worsley."

Elizabeth stared at the man beside her, as though the Jacob she had known had disappeared and been replaced with this imposter.

His words did not make sense. *Why could he not? He had the power, and he had the chance to make them all so happy. Why was he saying this?*

She swallowed. "You cannot break the engagement with Miss Worsley? You cannot be in earnest."

A cold spring breeze rushed past them, through Elizabeth, who felt like ice. Jacob nodded without speaking.

Elizabeth sat in stunned silence. *How was it possible that the man who had rescued her from an unhappy marriage, who had given her a child, could now betray her?*

Had it not only been days ago—less than a week—that they had made love again? She had trusted him to break the engagement, to honor his commitment to her.

Not that he had made any commitment, she could see that now. *No, he had whispered love and such things, but nothing solid. Nothing in stone.*

Tears prickled at the corners of her eyes, but she would not let them fall. *Not now, at any rate. Not here.*

"And may I ask why?"

"It is complicated."

Elizabeth laughed bitterly. "Well, I am clever, so do me the courtesy of explaining! I am sure I will understand."

The fierceness of her voice belied the pain underneath it. *How could he do this to her? This was not the Jacob Beauvale she knew.*

"I did not come here for an argument," Jacob began in a low voice.

"You thought you could just turn up here, in a public place so I would not shout at you, and dictate your next actions—the next actions of my life?"

Elizabeth swallowed down the bile rising in her throat and wondered whether she was going to be sick. *This was a nightmare.* Perhaps she would wake up and find this had all been a terrible dream. She wanted to wake up and find Jacob next to her, all this confusion behind them, in their bed, in their own home.

"You cannot instruct me what to do," Jacob said, abruptly. "I have to make my own decisions, and—"

Elizabeth laughed. "Why should I not instruct you? You listen to Lady Romeril, you listen to Miss Worsley, neither of whom are blood relations—why not listen to the mother of your child!"

"Hush!" Jacob looked around them but saw no one close enough to



have heard her words.

"Why?" Elizabeth said, feeling strangely hysterical. "What is the point of being hushed? If you do not stand by me, Jacob Beauvale, then I have no one. I will have to learn to speak up to get what I want—what our son deserves."

The bitter words poured out, and she could not stop them. It was clear from the twisted look on his face that Jacob was in just as much pain, but she had to push that sympathy away.

*How could she feel sorry for him?* He was the one who had created this mess, him and his inability to break off the engagement with Miss Worsley. If he refused to stand by her, then she had no choice but to go her own way. She had to think of her son.

Jacob sighed heavily. "There is too much to explain now. You are just going to have to believe me when I say that I need to marry her. But you know me, Lizzy. You know I have no wish to."

The anger that had been bubbling up in her stomach came to the fore again. "I told you to do just that, less than a week ago! I told you to marry Miss Worsley and to leave Lenskeyn House, and what did you do?"

She glared and did not complete her sentence. She did not need to. They both knew what had happened.

"For all we know," she said in a lower voice, "I am with child again—with your child!"

A look of panic grazed Jacob's face. "What? Do—do you think that is even possible?"

Elizabeth's laugh sounded resentful, even to her. "Well, I believed myself to be barren before, did I not? Who knows now? Perhaps it was Elmore's problem, and here I could be, pregnant with a baby that could not possibly be my late husband's this time!"

Jacob's eyes were wide, and he looked around Sydney Gardens as though someone could rush in and help him. *But no one could save him now*, Elizabeth knew that. *It was time for Jacob to save himself.*

"I do this," he said heavily, "to protect you—"

"I do not feel protected," Elizabeth snapped.

Silence fell as they both watched people promenade along the paths. For all the world could see, they were two acquaintances who had met coincidentally and had decided to sit and talk. Little could they know the depths of despair they were both in.

Jacob sighed heavily. "Sophia—Miss Worsley has said she will tell everyone about us if I do not marry her."

Elizabeth turned to look at him, mouth wide open, and he nodded.

"Your reputation will be ruined, and you will lose the protection of the Howard family," he continued. "You will no longer be the mother of their grandson. Then what will you do?"

Elizabeth hesitated. This was not something she could have predicted. Miss Worsley, blackmail Jacob into marriage? It was hardly the beginning of a caring marriage, but evidently, Sophia did not care about that. What she wanted was Jacob, and it looked as though she was going to get him.

*And what was Elizabeth to do?* She swallowed, trying desperately to think. If the news got out...if the Howards found out that Beau was a Beauvale, not a Howard, then she would certainly no longer be permitted to live at Lenskeyn House. She had nowhere else to go.

No, she thought fiercely. *There was always something, wasn't there?*

"Your Miss Worsley sounds like a piece of work," she said quietly. "Is that really a marriage you wish to enter? Blackmail and lies?"

"Better than you losing your reputation," Jacob said, fire in his words now. "You and Beau..."

Elizabeth thought about it. *It was not to be borne.* "Marry me then. Do not marry Miss Worsley. Marry me—it will all end the same anyway. I will have lost my reputation, but...but we will be together."

She could hardly believe she was saying this. *Here she was, more than thirty years old and with a child, and she was having to propose to get the man she wanted.*

Glancing at Jacob, however, she knew it was worth it. She would happily get on bended knee right here if it would mean Jacob would marry her. She loved him. Everything about him drew her to him, and they were connected now, through Beau, in a way no one else could ever replace.

In that instant, before Jacob replied, she was certain he would say yes.

He shook his head. "That is not possible. Do you not think I have already thought that, already tried to make it work? There is a will, a codicil that—'tis complicated, why don't you just believe me when I say that?"

Jacob had not shouted, but the ferocity of his words tipped Elizabeth over the edge. Tears started to fall.

"I cannot talk to you like this," Jacob snapped, rising to his feet. "I-I cannot do it. All you need to know is that this is at an end. Good day."

Tears continued to fall as she watched the man she loved storm

away. She had lost him forever, then. And Beau had lost his father.



## Chapter Sixteen

Jacob had never noticed his bedchamber ceiling before.

*Why should he?* He was either asleep or getting out of bed.

Jacob blinked slowly. The view of his ceiling disappeared and then reappeared again.

Monotony was never something he had encountered. Every day he had been doing something, going somewhere, seeing someone.

*Elizabeth.*

He pushed her from his mind hurriedly and thought instead of how tired he was. *How was it possible to be so tired when one had spent the last two days in bed doing nothing?*

Breakfast had been called hours ago. When his butler had announced luncheon by knocking on the door, Jacob had given no answer.

*Food? How could he eat? How could a single morsel pass his lips when he had just condemned himself to a lifetime with a woman who had no real desire to be with him?*

Jacob moved the covers, so he was cooler. He could rise, of course, and move away from the streaming sunlight pouring through his window.

*What was the point?* Nothing mattered anymore. No matter what he attempted to do, he would always find himself back where he started. He had to marry Sophia.

Jacob rubbed his eyes.

*Elizabeth and Beau had to be protected.* Their reputations would never survive the scandal—he had no doubt Sophia was as bad as her word—and he could not let that happen to them. Not to the two people he loved more than anything in the world.

Beau would grow up a Howard. Never before had Jacob realized just how important it was that his son had his name and not that of the brute he had gambled with.

But, as a Howard, Beau would have everything he could possibly wish for. A good name, a good family, and surely an income of sorts from his father's lands and homes. Most importantly, Beau would be

protected. He would never have to worry about who he was or about how he would navigate society.

*He probably has a place at Eton with his name on it, Jacob thought, and rightly so.* No Howard would struggle. Beau would have the lifestyle of a gentleman his whole life, if he was clever. *Far better off without his wretch of a father.*

It pained Jacob to think this way, but there was no way around it. He had always thought he would be rather a good father. A joking, jesting one perhaps, but still. One who would love his sons and daughters and receive their love in return.

Jacob knew he should be ashamed of himself, and in those moments when he could feel, he did. For all he knew, Elizabeth would never tell Beau who his real father was, not after how he had behaved.

*Why should she?* Elmore may have been a brute to his wife and a terrible cheat at cards, but he had been otherwise beloved by society. His mother could not cease singing his praises, and a good deal of people now calling themselves Elmore Howard's friends kept going on about how noble he was.

Jacob turned onto his side. *Well, he had never seen much nobility in Elmore, but that was a far better story than the truth.*

He swallowed. In just ten days, he would be marrying Sophia.

*"Marry Miss Worsley, and be happy. Stop coming here. You will still see Beau occasionally. I will arrange it with my butler. You must see this is for the best."*

If only he had listened. If only he had put aside his desires and thought about someone other than himself. He had satiated his desire for Elizabeth, and now he would pay the ultimate price: losing her forever.

The memory of Elizabeth's naked body beneath his own soared into his mind, and despite his sadness, a smile appeared. *He was weak.* He had allowed himself to be tempted, and what's more, he had pulled her into temptation with him.

A knock on the door startled Jacob from his reverie.

"Go away."

Instead of leaving him to his misery, however, it was clear his butler was going to intrude. Opening the door and wrinkling his nose at what Jacob could only assume was the smell from his riding boots, cast carelessly near the door, the servant bowed his head.

"You have a visitor, my lord."

Jacob laughed, but it died in his throat as the servant merely looked

at him serenely. "A—a visitor? You cannot be serious. Do I look ready for visitors?"

Stewart cleared his throat. "I did say this, your lordship, but unfortunately—"

"Nonsense, I have seen Lord Westray without his drawers on before, and I dare say I shall again," said the woman who was even now pushing past the protesting servant.

"Wh-What—Lady Romeril!" Jacob spluttered.

It was indeed Lady Romeril. Stewart raised an eyebrow at her pronouncement, and Jacob wished he was wearing a stitch of clothing.

"When he was a young baby, obviously," Lady Romeril amended. "Though I am sure I won't see anything that I haven't seen before, one way or the other."

Jacob closed his eyes in shame. *Was this what his life had come to? Being shouted at by Lady Romeril as he lay in bed?*

*Why, oh why, had he not bothered to get up this morning?*

"Now, go away, Stewart," ordered Lady Romeril imperiously, pulling a chair to Jacob's bedside and sitting upon it as if it were a throne.

Jacob opened his eyes and looked beseechingly at his butler. *Surely the trusted servant would not abandon him, not like this, with her?*

But it appeared Stewart was more afraid of Lady Romeril than his own master. With nothing but an apologetic look, the servant bowed low and closed the door.

Jacob swallowed. He needed to take this conversation in hand. *Really, Lady Romeril could not just storm into people's bedrooms and order their servants about!*

"Really, Lady Romeril," he said with as much power as a gentleman could when surprised in his own bedchamber in the nude. "This is most irregular."

"A godmother can do whatever she likes when it is in the best interest of her godson," Lady Romeril said smoothly. "Peppermint?"

"Pepper—what?"

Jacob looked down. Lady Romeril had pulled a small square box from her reticule and opened it. A waft of peppermint rose in the air.

"No, thank you," he said stiffly. "Now, if you wouldn't mind, I would like to be left alone."

"Not for long, I think," said Lady Romeril swiftly, popping a peppermint sweet in her mouth. "Another few days, and you will have a wife to mope about."

*This really was too bad of her, Jacob thought wildly. After all she had*

*done for him, he was very grateful and would, of course, be a very polite and calm godson. But really!*

"Lady Romeril, it was you who came to me saying I needed to marry," he said as calmly as possible. "I had no wish for matrimony if you remember. It was you who suggested Miss Worsley in the first place. I have done as you have asked."

Lady Romeril nodded. "You have indeed."

"Then why have you turned up in my bedchamber, of all places!" Jacob exploded.

If he thought she would be surprised or even startled at his rude manner, he was very much mistaken. Instead, she serenely examined him as though checking him for measles, and then sighed heavily.

"You missed the cake tasting, you know."

Jacob closed his eyes. *As if he cared about the blasted cake tasting.* "Who cares?"

It was an unguarded moment and one his godmother seized upon. "Your betrothed, actually. A Miss Sophia Worsley. Had you perchance forgotten about her?"

It was impossible not to feel like a naughty schoolboy when Lady Romeril took that tone. Every gentleman in society felt that way, no matter his age, but it was most unfair on Jacob, who had actually been a naughty schoolboy in Lady Romeril's house and had found himself on the wrong side of a tongue lashing more than once.

"I wish I had forgotten about her," he said sullenly, despite himself, opening his eyes to look at her defiantly.

It did not work. "You are behaving like a petulant child."

Jacob sighed. *Worse, he knew he was, and still, he could not force himself to be any more adult.* It was easier being a child in some ways. Everything was a lot simpler.

"You asked me to get married," he said as calmly as he could. "You told me about the accursed codicil, much good may it do me, and since that moment, I have done everything you have wanted."

"Except for the cake tasting."

Jacob's jaw clenched. "Except the cake tasting," he admitted. "But the damned codicil says nothing about having to get up every day by eight o'clock in the morning, so if I decide to stay in bed all day, I wish you would leave me to it."

He had hoped his speech would encourage her to leave him alone, but apparently, Lady Romeril was quite comfortable where she was.

"My dear boy, I have known you from a child, and your mother, too,

and that makes me far older, far wiser, and far better able to have my way than anyone you care to mention,” she said bluntly. “I suppose it is too much of a coincidence that the cake tasting is the last decision for this wedding of yours.”

Jacob said nothing. *He had said his piece, and he was going to ignore his godmother as much as humanly possible—within the bounds of decorum, of course.*

“Tis only a week or so away, you know.”

“Decisions, decisions,” Jacob snapped, unable to help himself. “There have been thousands of decisions for this bloody wedding, and I have not been given the chance to make any of them.”

“I would disagree with that, my boy,” Lady Romeril said drily. “One could argue you have made the only important one. The woman.”

He glanced over at his godmother. Now he had got over the shock of her storming into his bedchamber, he had to admit that it was good to see her. There were few people in his life he could turn to in a crisis, and if she wasn’t one, then he did not know who was.

*Could he say something to her? Would she listen to him, really listen, and hear his concerns? Or would that simply mean waving goodbye to the codicil and the fortune that accompanied it?*

Jacob had never been afraid of Lady Romeril as a child. Perhaps it was because his parents had been so unceremoniously ripped from his hands. Perhaps they were kindred spirits—there was a sort of understanding between them.

He was suspicious of her ability to keep any news to herself. Lady Romeril loved gossip, and the whole endeavor would be scuppered if she simply blabbed his secrets to the world.

*No. No, this was a burden he would have to bear alone.*

Sighing heavily, Jacob said, “Yes, I chose Sophia. And she is fine, just fine.”

Lady Romeril snorted. “No woman, no bride, wants to be described that way.”

He smiled at her outrage. “I suppose not, but I do not love her, Lady Romeril, and I have made no secret of that to her. I have not told her I have no regard for her, but I have not lied about it. I won’t pretend, and Sophia knows that.”

“Love? e were talking of marriage, not love.”

A prickle of anger sparked behind Jacob’s eyes. *Who was she to come here and lecture him about love and marriage, merely a week before the wedding he was only going ahead with because she had suggested it in the*



*first place!*

“Love is surely vital for a good marriage,” he said defensively. “How can one expect a marriage to last, if not for love?”

His godmother seemed supremely unconcerned as she shrugged. “I managed it. Plenty of people, good people, manage it. Some people may never know it, more’s the pity, but they get along somehow. A life without love is not the worst one can lead.”

“Well, I know something of love,” said Jacob rashly. “And love cannot compare to the mere liking of a person, but—but I made a commitment to Sophia and to you, and I’m going through with it.”

As he spoke those words, something crossed his mind that had simply not occurred to him before. *He had assumed, moronically perhaps, that once he was wed and the terms of the codicil had been fulfilled, that the fortune coming to him would be his to do with what he liked.*

Lady Romeril had never said that. Was the wealth, perhaps, going to both himself and Sophia? Worse, would he need to account for where he spent the money?

“This additional fortune,” he said as nonchalantly as he could, “when I have it. The money will be my own, won’t it, to do with what I will?”

Jacob could not prevent nerves seeping into his tone as he spoke. *Damn and blast it, but he should have inquired before now.* He would hate to be a fool and go ahead with this anchor of a marriage, only to discover he would not be able to send the money to Beau at all.

Lady Romeril was examining him closely, and as anyone did when under her sardonic glare, he fidgeted. It was impossible to read her face. She would have made an absolute killing at poker.

“Yes, entirely yours. Do not forget,” she said suddenly, “Engagements can be broken. Marriages cannot.”

Jacob swallowed. It was as though she was looking right into his soul.

“You should be certain, absolutely certain, you are making the right decision, my boy,” she said slowly. “Once it is made, marriage is very difficult to escape. Do not make the mistakes so many before you have already made. Learn from them. *Be sure.*”

Her words rang out into the still room, and Jacob swallowed. *What a pronouncement. What on earth did she mean by it?*

But before he could ask, before he could say another word, Lady Romeril rose.

“And I must be off,” she said smartly. “I cannot sit around all day waiting for you to make your mind up. I am a very important person,

you know. I will see you tomorrow.”

Lady Romeril had bustled away and closed the door before Jacob could comprehend she was leaving.

Jacob stared at the door, which she had just closed. *What had his godmother been attempting to tell him?*

After all that fuss about the codicil, after introducing him to Sophia and encouraging him to just get on with it...

It was all terribly confusing, and he had a headache. *Little wonder*, he supposed, *after eating and drinking almost nothing all day, staying indoors.*

He needed to get out. Out of this bed, out of this room, out of this house.

Out of the country, if he wasn't so sure Lady Romeril would find him and drag him back to marry Sophia.

Jacob rose from his bed, sighed heavily, and reached for his breeches. He needed to talk to someone who was removed from the situation. Someone who would not attempt to make him feel guilty for his decisions.

It was time to see the Mercias. It had been months since he had visited them, and they were wise enough not to ask irritating questions.

Ringling the bell by his bed, Jacob was able to find one sock but was still hunting for the other by the time his valet arrived.

“You rang, your lordship?” Penrose’s nose scrunched up just as the butler’s had done, and Jacob made a mental note to have a bath before he left the house.

“I did indeed. I am leaving for a visit with the Mercias,” he said smartly. “Please procure an outfit for me while I have a bath.”

“An excellent decision, your lordship,” said the valet a little too eagerly for Jacob’s liking.

After a thorough soak and scrub, Jacob allowed himself to be dressed carefully by his valet, who kept up a constant and rather irritating stream of nonsense.

“—which I had said from the beginning was far too heavy for the season, but they did insist, and now I have had to send your wedding suit back for a change, and I do apologize, your lordship. It cannot be helped, however, and I do hope by the wedding day—”

“Enough,” snapped Jacob, “about my wedding day.”

It was only a short walk to the Mercias’ home.

*They would be in. They were always in.* Jacob smiled as he walked down the street, passing people selling their wares or shouting out greetings to others.

That was one of the marvelous things about Charlotte and William Mercia. They loved being at home like Jacob did.

Turning the corner onto their street, it only took him a few more minutes before he was outside their front door, knocking away and relishing the chance to have conversations that were not about weddings and babies.

It was only when the door was opened by an exhausted-looking footman, and the cries of a newborn spilled out onto the street that he remembered.

*Damn.*

"You know, I think I might," began Jacob, but he was interrupted by a figure who had peered out of a room into the hall.

"Westray! Good man, knew it wouldn't be long before we saw you. Come on in—wife will be down in a moment. Little Elizabeth, as you can hear, is not happy."

William was grinning, and Jacob had no choice but to step in, hand his top hat and coat to the footman, and follow his host to the drawing room.

*Damn and blast it.* That was why he hadn't seen the Mercias for a while; Charlotte had gone back into confinement. It felt like only yesterday since she was confined for their first child, a strapping boy who had taken his father's name and now toddled about as though he owned the place. In a way, one day, he would.

"Elizabeth, you say?" It was impossible not to have his heart tugged at the name, but he carried on. "Congratulations, old boy."

William grinned. Jacob had only met the Duke of Mercia once Charlotte had married him. Their paths had never crossed before due to the simple reason that William had not been the Duke of Mercia most of his life.

"Second child in two years!" his host said proudly. "And they told me Charlotte would be too old to have children, what utter rot! Come on in and sit down—you know, Richard, obviously."

With a sinking heart after hoping so desperately for a calm and distinctly adult conversation with two of his friends, Jacob saw seated across the drawing room were the Axwicks. Richard and Tabitha St. Maur, Duke and Duchess of Axwick. Charlotte's brother and his wife—and by the looks of it, their child, too.

"How do you do?" he asked weakly before falling into a chair.

*Children, weddings, marriages—was it even possible to escape them?* Jacob's heart sank as William continued nattering on. Little William

wandered up to him, eyes wide at the strange gentleman who had come to call, and very solemnly handed over a small wooden horse.

Jacob accepted it with a sigh. *Look at them. These four tied together by blood, their children growing up together—he would never see Beau grow in the same way. No, he would always be apart from Elizabeth and his son.*

“That is not what I said!” Richard protested with a grin across his face. “And I would challenge you to a duel if you weren’t so sure to win!”

Laughter rang out amongst them, and Jacob attempted to smile. *They were so happy, so content. A family.*

“Here you go, old boy.”

Jacob looked up to see William standing before him with a glass in one hand and a bottle of whiskey in the other. Without waiting to offer him the drink, the duke poured out a glass and shoved it into Jacob’s free hand.

“What? No, thank you,” Jacob tried to say, giving the boy his toy back. “Bit early in the day, isn’t it?”

William gave a smile. “Tell that to your face.”



## Chapter Seventeen

The rushing street full of noisy shouting, the clatter of hooves, the rush of carriages, the laughter of those passing, and the debates of gentlemen did nothing to calm the frantically beating heart of Elizabeth.

*This was a mistake.* She had known it the moment she had opened the invitation but felt obliged—nay, she *was* obliged to answer it in the affirmative.

She cast a look down Camden Place and saw the odd numbers were on the other side of the road. Bath was altogether too busy, too crowded in the early spring, despite the end of the Season.

Beau wriggled in her arms. *What had she been thinking, leaving Lenskeyn House?* Molly had been insistent she would not be able to carry a four-month-old all day, and what had Elizabeth said?

Eventually spotting a gap in the carriages as one slowed to allow its passengers to disembark, she strode across the street with purpose, holding her head high.

*Was it her imagination, or was everyone passing them staring? Were those increased giggles, whispers which included the name Lord Westray?*

*Or was she just imaging it? Was she so obsessed—*Elizabeth reached the pavement and breathed deeply. She had to stop this. She had to leave him behind. That was precisely what Jacob was doing.

*Leaving her behind to marry Miss Worsley.*

Now all she had to do was continue with her own life, which was full of joy and her son. *Their son.*

She looked up at the imposing building before her. This was a place she had never intended to come and had never before received an invitation.

*Camden Place.* One of the most prestigious addresses in Bath, and just one of the homes of Albemarle Howard, fourteenth Earl of Lenskeyn and his wife—and now, their child.

Beau wriggled happily in her arms, turning his head this way and that to peer where his mother was looking.

Elizabeth had received an invitation from the new countess, her

sister-in-law, to see the baby.

In her haste to respond to the letter, she had not taken in whether the younger Howard baby had been a girl or boy. And that mattered. A boy would displace her Beau in the line of succession, a welcome gift. *But a girl...*

Elizabeth swallowed. A girl would leave Beau the heir to the earldom, and so the grip of the Howards around their lives would continue.

Hiding away would not solve everything. It would not solve *anything*. Beau could still be the heir to the Howard fortune, and Miss Sophia would in less than a week become Lady Westray.

Elizabeth looked up at the imposing bellpull and hesitated.

It had all been a lie. Everything Jacob had said had been a lie.

*"Miss Worsley be damned, I love you!"*

She had been foolish to be taken in by his words, those lovely sweet nothings that promised so much and yet committed so little.

*She had made that mistake before, had she not?* It had not been the first time she had heard the promises of a handsome gentleman and believed, because he was handsome, because he cut a fine figure and drove a barouche, that he could be trusted.

*The same mistake twice.* She was an absolute fool and was now paying the price.

A small part of her had wondered whether she would see Jacob today. He was certainly in Bath, but he was nowhere to be seen, and Elizabeth hated that she was disappointed. What would she have done if she had seen him?

Nothing. There was nothing to say. He had said all in Sydney Gardens last week, and there had been nothing she could do. *How could one force a gentleman to abide by the secret promises he had made?*

She sighed heavily and pulled the bell again. *The sooner this appointment with the Howards began, the sooner it would end.* Then she could call a carriage, or perhaps even be sent home in one of their own, and she and Beau would be back in the safety of Lenskeyn House.

The door opened, and a footman dressed in the most ostentatious livery opened it.

"Ah, Mrs. Howard," he said with a bow.

Elizabeth forced a smile.

She stepped inside and, as the door shut behind her, the hustle and bustle of the street disappeared. Only then did she realize how quickly her heart was beating.

“May I take your pelisse, my lady?”

Elizabeth smiled at the footman as he looked uncomfortably at the baby in her arms. “Not unless you have four arms. Do not worry, I shall remove it when I sit down.”

“This way, my lady,” the footman said, looking awkward but gesturing she should walk forward and enter the second room on the left. “His lordship and my lady are waiting.”

Elizabeth inclined her head. *Had no one ever seen a baby before?* It was most unaccountable that the world should be designed to make it difficult for anyone holding an infant.

“There she is!” came the warm welcome from Theodosia as Elizabeth stepped into the drawing room. “And perfectly on time, that is what I like to see.”

Elizabeth smiled despite her fears. There was something so...well, all-encompassing about Theodosia. No matter who you were, she could make you feel at ease in a moment.

She had once been a matchmaker, Elizabeth knew, and it must have been a useful skill when finding the best brides and grooms for society’s elite.

“Good afternoon, Theodosia,” she said. “And your lordship.”

Albemarle was lounging on a sofa, looking utterly on top of the world. Theodosia, on the other hand, looked a little rough around the edges. She recognized the signs. *Recent entry to motherhood.*

It was only something another mother would notice. The tiredness around the eyes was expected, as was the lackadaisical approach to styling one’s hair.

“We have just put little Wilhelmina to sleep,” said Theodosia heavily, seating herself beside her husband and closing her eyes. “For now.”

Albemarle grinned and gestured that Elizabeth should sit. She lowered herself gently onto a sofa, placing Beau beside her. He happily stared up at her and his new surroundings as his mother removed her pelisse.

“It appears that you were strong-armed into a name, there,” she said hesitantly. The last thing she wanted was for her in-laws to report back her cheek to the dowager countess.

But it appeared she would not be so censured.

Theodosia rolled her eyes. “I tell you, Elizabeth, do not get me started. I had wished for a simpler name—Mary, perhaps, or Elizabeth like yourself. But after our delightful mother-in-law threw herself into hysterics—”

"Which I do not believe were genuine for a moment," interrupted her husband with a grin. "She sobbed to force me into matchmaking, and I noticed afterward that there were no tears on her—"

"And so now we have Wilhelmina," said Theodosia, shaking her head. "I suppose I shall become accustomed to it in time. 'Tis all my fault, of course, for not having a boy."

Beau chose that rather inopportune moment to gurgle happily.

Elizabeth colored. "It is rather awkward, is it not? I mean, I never thought—"

A loud screech echoed through the house and cut through the two ladies as nothing else could. Even Elizabeth, who knew it was not her child, had a visceral reaction.

Theodosia closed her eyes, and Albemarle patted her on the arm. "I will go. Though what fool gave Nurse the day off today..."

"You did," Theodosia said as he left the room. "Well, 'tis all strange for both of us, joining a strange family, although I suppose you have had time to acclimatize yourself to the dowager's ways. We will call her Mina, anyway. I wouldn't burden her with that full name!"

Elizabeth chuckled. There was something intensely reassuring to know her sister-in-law was just as boisterous and defiant as she wished to be.

It was impossible not to like Theodosia. She was strong-willed; that was what the gossips had always said. But Elizabeth liked that.

It felt foolish now to think back on her trepidation in coming. In truth, it was a relatively pleasant change from the same rooms she had spent the last year. And Theodosia was remarkably pleasant. It would do her good to know her better.

Another baby scream came down the stairs, and Theodosia smiled with exhaustion. "It does get better, doesn't it?"

Beau chose that particular moment to decide his world was not as it should be and let out an almighty scream of displeasure.

Elizabeth smiled as she picked up her boy and held him close. "Would you believe me if I said yes?"

Theodosia laughed. "Well, I consider myself forewarned. Albie—Albemarle should be down in a few moments. He is so good to her. Cake?"

"Wh—oh, yes." Elizabeth had not noticed the tea things set out on a side table, nor the considerable fruit cake on a stand beside it. "I have found feeding Beau to be utterly exhausting, especially when..."

Her voice trailed off as her cheeks heated. It was not seemly to speak



of such things.

“Oh, I quite agree,” said Theodosia as she cut a large slice of fruit cake, placed it on a plate, and handed it to her. “Feeding Mina has been like running miles every day!”

Elizabeth almost sagged with relief. Here was a woman who understood the matriarch of their family, had a child similar in age to Beau, and was choosing to nurse.

“I have done some reading on the subject,” Theodosia said, cutting herself a slice of cake. “There are many different approaches. I had no idea. When I first began...”

Eating a slice of fruit cake with only one hand was difficult enough, and Elizabeth found it increasingly challenging to pay attention to her hostess’s conversation.

Jacob’s parting words to her were still ringing in her ears, ringing in her heart.

*“I cannot talk to you like this. I-I cannot do it. All you need to know is that this is at an end. Good day.”*

Was her desperation to be with Jacob only a reaction to being without a husband? A widow always felt alone. A widow always felt unprotected, unshielded from the world. But was that right? Thanks to her brother and sister-in-law, was she ever truly alone?

Elizabeth tried to nod and eat at the same time. Beau wriggled, as eager to be out of her arms as he had been to be in them just moments ago. She placed him beside her on the sofa, freeing her hands to balance the cake better, and tried once again to attend to Theodosia.

“—but I found that advice quite useless,” she was saying. “When I tried it a different way, it was much better, more comfortable to—”

Elizabeth nodded as she swallowed a mouthful of cake. *Jacob did not seem able to leave her mind—or was it that she was simply dwelling on what she could not have?*

He had always known, somehow, exactly how to captivate her, make her feel special, cared for, beloved. She could not trust herself when she was with him.

He was making a mistake by marrying Miss Worsley. *Surely they could not be happy if she was enforcing the engagement through a twisted sort of blackmail?*

Her stomach lurched. She knew what it was to regret one’s marriage. She did not want that for Jacob. She would not wish it on anyone.

“I must apologize for my daughter, who has her father’s temper and her mother’s lungs,” said Albemarle.

Elizabeth jumped. She had not noticed his return.

"It does not matter," Theodosia said without malice. "Elizabeth was not listening to a word I was saying, anyway."

Heat seared Elizabeth's cheeks. "I was—at least, I will admit I was trying to. Motherhood, you know." She smiled weakly. "'Tis amazing what one is unable to do when one has a newborn."

"I know exactly what you mean," said Albemarle seriously. "Whenever Theodosia forgets something, it feels ridiculous. I mean, you know your own middle names, surely! But then I recall that I, unlike she, am enjoying at least seven hours of sleep a night. No sleep can do strange things to a mind."

But Theodosia was watching Elizabeth closely with a skeptical look on her face.

"If I did not know any better," said Theodosia softly, "I would say you were in love."

*What could she say?* Elizabeth was not a liar by nature, never had been.

All she could do now was sigh heavily. It was the only alternative to an outright falsehood.

Albemarle and Theodosia exchanged glances.

Elizabeth turned to look at Beau. He had fallen asleep, utterly exhausted with the excitement of leaving home.

Then she looked at her hosts. In many ways, they were strangers to her. But they were family. More, they were family who had supported her through the most trying time, and in some situations, taken her side against her mother-in-law.

Elizabeth was sure she could trust them. Even if she did not give all the details, sharing some of the burden on her heart would surely do her good.

She had battled with this for so long on her own, she wasn't sure whether she could stand it anymore.

"How..." Elizabeth swallowed.

"Tea," said Theodosia firmly.

There were a few minutes of silence as Theodosia poured the tea, and after she had taken a few sips of the scalding but soothing liquid, she tried again.

"How did you know that you were right for each other?"

"We didn't," Theodosia said blankly.

Albemarle laughed as Elizabeth colored. "I am afraid we are hardly the best people to ask for simple answers, Elizabeth. Life—love is more

complicated than that.”

Elizabeth shifted in her seat. Perhaps this had been a mistake.

“’Tis very common, of course, in romances,” said Theodosia thoughtfully. “One person realizes there is something there, but the other one has not yet. There is often an imbalance. Of timing, not of affection.”

A frown creased Elizabeth’s forehead as she sipped her tea. “But in all the stories I have read—”

“Oh, well,” Theodosia said with a laugh. “Yes. Stories.”

Perhaps her prickled feelings were visible on her face, for Albemarle said, “You must forgive the bluntness of my wife.”

His wife looked mortified. “Oh, please do not misunderstand me, Elizabeth. No, I am not laughing at you. Have we not all read the stories, over and over again! I fell for them, too. Did...did you know I was once engaged to another man, before Albemarle?”

Elizabeth felt her mouth fall open and had to close it. No hint had ever reached her.

“No, I did not know,” she said quietly. “No idea in the slightest.”

Albemarle was nodding. “Love...love arrives in strange ways. Every story is different, and the storybooks themselves are not entirely wrong. Some people do fall in love at first sight.”

Theodosia snorted, making Elizabeth smile.

“Well, they do,” said Albemarle with a lazy grin. “Trust me. If you could spend a little time in some of the clubs I am a member of, you would find more than one gentleman who realized his wife was the person with whom he wanted to spend the rest of his life within seconds of meeting her. Just because gentlemen do not talk about it...”

Elizabeth’s eyes were wide as she took another sip of tea. The idea of gentlemen being the true romantics had never crossed her mind. *Why they were such animals most of the time!*

“But that sort of romance is not typical, and no one should expect it,” Albemarle continued. “For most of us, love is messy, complicated, and it hurts. Ours certainly did.”

It was difficult to keep her countenance calm. She had not heard the intimate details of Albemarle and Theodosia’s courtship—he had lived on the Continent for the past decade, and so she barely knew him. Theodosia was just one of the ladies she had been permitted by Elmore to have in her home.

But she had attended their wedding. They looked so much in love—even now, a year later, it was evident how strongly they felt about each

other. Seated here talking to her, there was always a point of contact between them. A hand on a shoulder. Arms touching gently.

Even the simplest romances were, it appeared, far more complicated.

“So...so you did not just fall in love and get engaged?”

Theodosia laughed again, and Albemarle shook his head.

Speaking in a dark voice, he said, “You think my mother—*my mother*, and you know her in some ways far better than I—would want me marrying someone without a title, without fortune, without connections?”

Elizabeth glanced at Theodosia, thinking she may be upset by this description, but she was still laughing.

“No, my mother tried to make it very clear how upset she was about the whole thing, and it almost broke us apart,” said Albemarle.

Elizabeth smiled. “It all came right in the end, though. You still have each other. You are married.”

“Yes,” said Theodosia, forcing down a hiccup from all her laughter. “But I tell you honestly, Elizabeth, it could have gone very differently. We had to be brave—both against his darling mother and against our own fears.”

Elizabeth caught her eye, and she wondered whether one day, Theodosia would be close enough to tell her the full story.

“Sometimes I wonder how we managed it and how we went on to create someone so precious,” Albemarle said.

He smiled at Theodosia, who smiled back, and for a minute, it was as though Elizabeth was not there.

*Well, perhaps her adventure with Jacob was not so unusual, then.* They had certainly had challenges laid at their door, although one could argue they had created most of them themselves.

Having something with Jacob like Albemarle and Theodosia shared—it was so precious. *Something like that should be fought for.*

“Tea,” said Theodosia quickly as she tore her gaze from her husband.

As Elizabeth handed over her cup to be refilled, she thought that although she had made plenty of mistakes, this one was Jacob’s.

He could have her. She had offered herself up on a silver platter, she and their son.

*It was Jacob who had turned away.*



## Chapter Eighteen

Jacob swallowed and tasted the bile in his throat. *There was no going back after this. This was it.* The most sacred, the most solemn day of his life, and he had no opportunity to recant once the vows were taken.

Sunlight streamed through the stained glass and painted pictures on the whitewashed walls.

Today was the day Miss Worsley became Lady Westray.

Jacob stamped his feet on the stone floor and heard the echo. This could not be real. His wedding was weeks away—maybe months!

But each day had slipped by, unnoticed, until finally, he had woken up that morning with a sense of dread he could not ignore.

Jacob turned to look at the pews filling with the good and the great of Bath society. Here he was, standing at the front of the altar, waiting for his bride. *His fate.*

His commitment to one woman, the woman he did not love.

His jaw clenched, causing tension in his neck and shoulders, but at least he could feel that. Everything else just seemed numb. *He* was numb. Life had continued, despite him wishing it to slow down.

*Damn and blast it, but he should be better than this!* Jacob cursed as much as he could silently, feeling guilty for such thoughts in a holy place.

This was ridiculous. Every day for the last week, perhaps longer, he had awoken with the absolute conviction that he would break off his engagement to Sophia.

*It had to be done. It would be painful, and it may not be quick, but it was imperative he do it.*

Now it was too late.

Jacob turned around. There were fewer gaps in the pews now, more familiar faces in the seats behind him.

*Well, he had sold himself and no mistake. That accursed codicil.*

No, he could not blame his parents. He had decided to follow the letter of those rules. He had himself to blame.

Jacob had never considered himself a weak man. Not until today.

For all his fine talk, his card-playing, his jests with his friends, he had proved himself a coward.

He had seen the opportunity to gain a larger income, and despite all his talk that money was not the most important thing in life, that friendship and respect were more important, here he was. Marrying a woman he did not love, while a woman he did love walked the earth with their child alone.

Yes, he would get the additional income. *Much good it would do him. Guineas he would have, but no self-respect.*

“If I did not know you better, Westray, I would say you seem a little nervous.”

Jacob turned back to smile at his best man. William Lennox, Duke of Mercia, was grinning in the same ridiculous get-up Jacob had been tied and buttoned into.

“Yes,” he said aloud without adding any details.

*Just how honest could he be with his best man?* It was Charlotte, William’s wife, that Jacob really knew. His closest friend had been on his honeymoon tour still, more’s the pity, and Charlotte and her brother had been so good to him over the years.

William was honorable enough to be told a secret—but the trouble was, Jacob thought he was probably too honorable. So honorable that he probably would not permit him to leave the wedding.

William would force him to come back, marry Miss Worsley, and have done with it. Jacob would not be surprised if his best man would use the barrel of a gun if he had to.

He was still watching Jacob closely, who laughed and tried to force a smile.

“Is not every gentleman nervous on his wedding day?”

William shook his head. “I have to say not. I did not feel any nerves, save that Charlotte might change her mind and decide to do without me.”

Jacob laughed and then stopped. “You—you are not in earnest?”

William shrugged. “I very much believe I was getting the better end of that deal, and I became concerned she would realize that. I was excited.”

Jacob felt a wave of nausea overwhelm his stomach. *Was this happiness?*

It felt more like regret for an action he had not even yet taken.

*Was happiness something one could learn?* Over time, was it possible to find a kind of happiness, even if it were not as deep and meaningful?

Could he and Sophia, somehow, find an equilibrium that would bring them both joy?

Jacob attempted to think back on his times with Sophia as the organ started to play, and his wedding guests started to chatter excitedly. He had so few memories of his time with her. He had courted her for months, and they had planned this wedding for almost a year.

*But joyful times, laughter, conversation that challenged him, intrigued him, entertained him?*

Those memories existed, but not with Sophia. It was Elizabeth. Elizabeth and their son. *His son.*

Elizabeth and Beau had utterly overtaken all his waking thoughts, his memories, and now it was too late to do anything about it.

Sophia was the woman he should focus on now, but how could he? Jacob closed his eyes as though that would block out the noise of the organ, the chatter of the people gathered here to watch Miss Sophia Worsley become Lady Westray. Still, the only person who appeared in his imagination was Elizabeth.

"I wonder how many gentlemen have cold feet at this point," grinned William, nudging Jacob from his reverie. "You better not need an extra pair of socks!"

"Do not jest," Jacob said stiffly.

*He should not have spoken.*

William's face fell, and he lowered his voice as he said, "Hell, Westray, you aren't serious?"

Jacob sighed heavily. It was better to keep his mouth shut, but he had to talk to someone about this. *Even if it was the last time he uttered his feelings for Elizabeth.*

"Let us just say, I have not entered into this betrothal without some regrets."

For some reason, this pronouncement seemed to please William. "Ah, I see. If you are worried you won't be able to bed any more women, trust me—once you have found the right one, it doesn't matter. All you want to do is be with her."

Jacob thought irresistibly of Elizabeth. "I have found the right one."

His best man slapped him on the back. "Excellent."

"I am not marrying her."

The look of delight on William's face quickly vanished. "What did you just say?"

Jacob leaned closer to him. "Look, you are my best man, confidant—confessor? I cannot lie to you. And do not worry, I am not going to do

anything foolish. This wedding is going ahead, whether I want it to or not.”

His words had been intended to reassure his companion, but all they seemed to do was horrify him.

With a shocked look, William whispered, “Truly. You are in love with another?”

Jacob did not trust his voice. *Why had he not asked William for help before?* Perhaps his subconscious had tried when his feet had taken him to his door last week—but with guests already in attendance, it had been impossible to speak with him privately.

He nodded and turned once more to look at the congregation. Everyone should be here by now, Sophia would be here any—

Elizabeth, there at the back of the church, holding a small bundle of life that could only be his son.

His heart twisted.

“I am hardly one to talk, I am sure,” muttered William. “I had made plenty of my own mistakes with the ladies before I met Charlotte, but come on, man. Marrying a woman you do not love when you are in love with another...”

His voice trailed off, as though attempting to make sense of Jacob’s predicament left him speechless.

“Well,” he said hopelessly with a shrug. “It makes no sense to me.”

It was difficult not to feel defensive at William’s nonchalance. After all, he had his happily ever after, his bride, and now their two children. It was easy with hindsight to know the decision he had made had been the right one.

“It does not have to make sense to you,” he said, fire in his tone. “It just has to make sense to me.”

William did not respond immediately. His temper had been cooled in France, Jacob knew, when losing one’s temper could mean the difference between life and death.

Jacob was still watching Elizabeth, who was resolutely not looking in his direction.

“And does it?” William asked quietly.

Jacob swallowed. *No, none of this made sense.* All he wanted was Elizabeth, and he was not going to have her—not unless she agreed to be his mistress.

The organ changed its tune. The wedding march began, the congregation rose to its feet, and the doors to the church were thrown open. A figure appeared outlined against the sun.



*This was it.* Jacob swallowed. He had run out of road, of time, of excuses, and within an hour, he would be married to Sophia.

He would be loyal to her. Once she was his wife, he would never think about—he would *attempt* never to think about Elizabeth, nor the child they shared, other than organizing the money.

There was no other option.

The figure in the church doorway stepped forward and became two figures. Sophia and Mr. Worsley. As they started to walk down the aisle, Sophia glanced around her with a smile on her face.

That smile froze as she saw Elizabeth. It became a scowl that quickly flickered back into a smile as she beheld her other guests.

Jacob tried not to sigh. *Was it to be like this for the rest of his life, then?* Would he ever be able to see Elizabeth, to see Beau without Sophia sneering? Would she make it impossible for them to ever meet? What if she found out about the money, stopped it somehow, leaving Beau and Elizabeth penniless?

As Mr. Worsley handed over his daughter's hand to Jacob, he smiled at his future son-in-law. Sophia was wearing a beautiful veil that did not hide her expression. The smile she turned to Jacob was composed.

"I was not sure," she whispered, "whether you would be here."

Jacob smiled wanly and fought the temptation to say he did not either. It would not do to admit considering jilting a bride who had been jilted before.

"Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today in the sight of God," began the vicar.

Jacob could not pay attention. It was taking all his iron will not to look at Elizabeth, but he knew she was now looking at him. Her gaze burned a hole in this soul.

The moment drew closer when he would vow to love, honor, and stay with Sophia for the rest of his life.

Elizabeth was all he wanted. *The idea of not being with her—the idea of her one day marrying another man, of sharing with that faceless stranger the intimacy they had shared together...*

Jacob could feel his heart pounding against his ribcage. A life without Elizabeth was not one worth living. A life without her and their son—without Beau. How could he countenance it?

Sophia was smiling far more naturally now. She was about to get everything she wanted: a husband, at last.

So lost was Jacob in his thoughts, that it took almost a full minute of silence and then someone in the congregation coughing for him to

realize everyone was waiting for him to do or say something.

“What?” he said distractedly.

There was laughter across the church, and Sophia’s grip on his hand tightened.

“Do not worry yourself,” the old vicar said kindly. “Tis very common, people get nervous when it comes to saying the vows. One hears it so often, I quite forget the momentous event it is for others. I said, do you take this woman to be thy wedded wife, to live together after God’s ordinance in the Holy Estate of matrimony? Wilt thou love her? Comfort her, honor and keep her, in sickness and in health, and forsaking all others keep only unto her as long as you both shall live?”

Jacob swallowed. *It would be so simple to take the easy way out. To do what he wanted, rather than what he should do.*

*But could he live with himself?*

“I do not.”

There was stirring in the congregation and muffled laughter.

The vicar laughed nervously. “No, the phrasing is—”

“I am sorry, Sophia—Miss Worsley,” said Jacob hurriedly under his breath as he looked into her eyes—eyes growing more furious with every passing syllable. “I believe you will thank me for this one day, though I can understand it may take some time. But I cannot marry you.”

There was a gasp from everyone in the church. William coughed loudly, and Mrs. Worsley raised a handkerchief to her eyes.

“You are going to jilt me,” Sophia said in a low voice full of steel. “Right here at the altar? As though I have not suffered enough—as though I do not have the knowledge to ruin not only your life but those you purport to love?”

Jacob took a deep breath. “Yes. And it is the best decision for you I will ever make. One day, I promise you will understand. You will thank me.”

The shouting started as he strode down the aisle without his bride, and the gasps and shrieks of surprise echoed as he grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and pulled her with him.

“What—Lord Westray, let go!” she protested, but he paid no heed.

*He had done it now, and no one could change his mind.* He was committed, and no amount of attempting to pull away from him or shouts of ‘Bring him back!’ from Mr. Worsley could stop him.

The day was sunny and bright outside, with just a hint of a breeze. As they stepped out of the church and turned a corner into a lane,

Elizabeth managed to pull her arm from his grip.

Jacob stopped to look at her. Never before had she appeared so incensed.

“You cannot do that! What on earth do you think you are doing—go back in there and—”

“No,” said Jacob simply.

Beau was still in his mother’s arms and was grinning cheerfully at the gentleman he recognized so well, which was not helping Jacob’s concentration.

“Y-You said you had to marry her!” spluttered Elizabeth. “You said you—why are you doing this? Are you determined to ruin my reputation as well as your own?”

Jacob said nothing. In that instant, he knew he had made the right decision.

True, Elizabeth appeared to be furious with him, but he had never felt more at peace. *This was the right decision.*

Ignoring her words and being careful not to crush Beau, Jacob stepped forward and kissed Elizabeth firmly on the mouth.

He had expected her to push him away—curse him, perhaps, swear she would never have anything more to do with him.

Elizabeth melted into his arms. Her free hand clutched the back of his neck, pulling him closer, and the only reason their kiss did not deepen into something more passionate was the presence of their son in her arms.

When Jacob finally pulled away, Elizabeth’s eyes were bright, and the look of scorn had disappeared.

“For our son,” Jacob said simply. “For all our future sons and daughters, and each other. *For you.* That is why I am doing this.”

Elizabeth smiled. “We will be notorious. Everyone will guess, now, the true parentage of our son. Have you considered that?”

Jacob grinned. “Trust me, I have thought about it too much. I would rather be notorious with you than miserable with Sophia.”

Elizabeth’s smile widened. “Well, in that case, we have a wedding to plan.”



## Chapter Nineteen

“Not too—I said *not* too close to the water! Jacob!”

Elizabeth laughed as she shouted, knowing full well her words would be utterly unheeded. It did not matter, really. She knew Jacob would launch himself into the loch if necessary. Anything for his boy. *Their* boy. *Beau*.

As she leaned back against the tree where they had lain their picnic blanket a few hours ago, she took in the magnificent view. Scotland had been far more than she could ever have hoped for. The vast open sky, the mountains, the way the landscape never stayed the same for more than ten miles together.

She could understand why Albemarle was eager to get back here, to the Lenskeyn seat up in the Highlands. It was a world apart from Bath and the hustle and bustle of town life.

The sun shone down on her as she looked out at her child and his father—her future husband—as they played right by the water’s edge.

“See, this stone could have been here hundreds of years,” said Jacob to the surely uncomprehending little boy sitting half in and half out of the water. “Here. There, what do you think?”

Elizabeth smiled. Jacob had been convinced Beau would be able to walk down the aisle with her when they wed. She was not so sure. Their son showed plenty of interest in crawling, but as that got him where he wanted to go, where was the incentive to stagger about on two legs?

Beau gurgled and threw the stone into the lake, giggling wildly at the ripples that poured out from it.

“Well done!” Jacob’s voice said on the breeze.

*They were so different, father and son.* They looked so different, anyway. Jacob’s dark hair was utterly absent from Beau’s blonde mop, so like her own.

But if one knew what they were looking for, one could see the resemblance—something in the brows, how they both frowned when they did not get their own way. Beau was undoubtedly more a Beauvale in his temperament than a Sandringham.

“Oh, you really are quite damp, aren’t you?” Jacob’s voice sounded surprised, and Elizabeth had to force down a laugh. *Looking after a child was still so new to him.* “We should probably get you out of there, old boy. Here we go.”

Lifting up his son into his arms, Jacob smiled as he turned toward her. It took only a minute for him to cross over the lawn and reach her, depositing their son between them as he kissed her forehead.

“You did not wish to come into the loch, too?” he said with a grin as Beau started to leave a damp patch on the picnic blanket.

Elizabeth chuckled as she started to pull off her son’s wet garments. It would not hurt him to have sun on his skin.

“No, I did not,” she said good-naturedly. “I prefer to have my feet on dry ground! There you are, Beau. Off you go.”

She watched happily as her son attempted to take a few steps and then quickly descended to all fours to scuttle across the grass.

Jacob laughed as he leaned back on his elbows. “That boy will be walking by the time I walk you back down the aisle, mark my words.”

Elizabeth shook her head with a smile. “And I think you are deluding yourself, and we will leave it at that. Beau will let us know soon, one way or the other.”

Both of them watched their son carefully as he crawled around, exploring the large rocks scattered about the ground, stopping to look for a while at a stick he found.

“For a moment, in that church,” said Jacob in a low voice, “I thought of going through with it.”

Elizabeth swallowed and hesitated before responding. Her instinct was to panic, but she had to learn to trust Jacob, particularly now he had made such a public commitment to her. *She had to learn to trust him.*

Nevertheless, despite the warmth of the sun, she felt a cold shiver pass through her. “What made you change your mind?”

She watched him, saw the crease of his brow as he considered the right words to describe that moment of utter panic. *A life without Jacob. It was not to even be considered.*

“I do not know,” he said eventually, eyes still on their son. “It all seems so long ago.”

Elizabeth laughed. “It was five days ago!”

Jacob grinned with that boyish charm she loved so well. “Yes, as I said. A lifetime ago.”

Silence fell as a hawk soared overhead on the lookout for some easy prey. The noise of a delighted Beau echoed around the empty loch as he

discovered a rock bigger than himself that he tried to lift.

*There was something so innocent about children,* Elizabeth mused. *When do we lose that innocence?*

"I spent so long worrying about what was going to happen," said Jacob slowly, "so many hours puzzling over the right thing to do, you have no idea. Eventually, I realized that life was going to continue and happen to me, whether I wanted it to or not."

Elizabeth nodded. "Carrying a child is a little like that. You can worry about it all you like, but birth is coming, whether you wish it to or not."

"It was my responsibility to change things if I did not like them the way they were," Jacob said bracingly. "The only person allowing things to happen against my wishes was me. *I* had to do something if I wanted to see a change in the world. And so I did."

They were exactly the words, though she had not known it, that Elizabeth had needed to hear. More than that, the words she knew had been deep inside him, but he needed to discover for himself.

Shifting on the picnic blanket, Elizabeth placed her head in his lap and looked up at the brilliant sky.

"I wish I had known that when I was younger," she said with a smile. "I married Elmore what seems like a lifetime ago merely because that was what young ladies did. You married the first man who asked you."

She felt as well as heard Jacob chuckle.

"Well, that is what happened!" she said defensively. "If I had had any self-respect in those days, I do not think...I *know* I would not have married him."

For the second time on that hot day by Loch Lenskeyn, she shivered. *She had been so sad, so alone.* The world had seemed like a distant thing—Elmore had kept it distant. No friends, no opportunities to go and make new acquaintances.

"But then," said Jacob quietly, "we would never have met. So there was some good in it somewhere."

It was an intriguing thought and not one that had occurred to Elizabeth before. "You are watching Beau, aren't you?"

"I am always watching Beau," came the reassuring voice of the man she loved. "But you have to admit, without being a Howard, our paths would never have crossed."

Elizabeth was not entirely sure. "You do not think we would have ever met?"

It was a strange concept.

“Well, Bath and London are large, when you move about in the right circles as we do,” said Jacob fairly, “one does not meet everyone.”

They fell into silence as Elizabeth considered his words. Though they moved in similar circles, she was so rarely permitted to leave the house and enter into society, it was unlikely she would meet any gentleman, let alone Jacob.

*If she had not married Elmore, she would not have been forced to give away Howard jewels to pay off his gambling debts. If Elmore had not created debts in the first place, Jacob would never have come to the house.*

“I am not sure I like the idea that my late husband is the reason I have found my future one,” she said, closing her eyes. “Surely we would have met elsewhere?”

“Perhaps,” came Jacob’s reassuring voice. “But you would probably have been married to someone else anyway. Perhaps this is Fate, what has happened between us. Perhaps I always had to marry you after your first marriage, as a widow.”

Elizabeth had to laugh at that.

She felt Jacob’s hand cup her cheek for a brief instant.

“You...you complete me, Lizzy.”

*How was it possible, Elizabeth thought with a smile, that Jacob could see inside her soul and say just what she needed to hear?*

“I do?” she asked teasingly.

She received a nudge for her impudence.

“You know you do,” said Jacob. “And in a new way. No matter what else befalls me, everything in my life is about you now. You and Beau.”

Elizabeth grinned as she folded her hands onto her stomach.

“Oh, did I mention I received a letter?” he asked.

Elizabeth was tilted slightly as Jacob leaned toward where he had thrown down his coat when they had opened up the picnic basket hours ago.

“Hmm?” Elizabeth really could not get excited about Jacob’s correspondence—not when it was likely to be packed full of reprimands from his friends in society.

“Yes, from my godmother.”

Elizabeth sat up so quickly her head started to spin. “Lady—Lady Romeril?”

Her heart fluttered wildly, and she frowned at the grin on Jacob’s face. It was all very well for him. He knew Lady Romeril well, and what’s more, she doted on him.

But his godmother was an exacting woman, famous for it. Elizabeth

was not ashamed to admit she was fearful of Lady Romeril and her lashing tongue.

“What does she want?” she attempted to say calmly.

Jacob’s smile broadened as he pulled the letter from his pocket. “Nothing too terrible, I promise you. Here, you can read it for yourself. I am going to rescue that poor stick from our son’s clutches.”

She could not help but laugh nervously as he placed the letter in her hands and walked away.

“Beau, no, that does not go in your mouth!”

The paper was expensive. Of course it was. Unfolding it, she saw Lady Romeril’s handwriting was old-fashioned but perfectly legible. Elizabeth started to read.

*Jacob,*

*There have been very few times in your life when I have been truly proud of you, but yesterday at your wedding, I have to say, I have never been more impressed.*

*Your mother, God rest her soul, knew how to make a scene too, of course, but even I could never have predicted one so immense, so outlandish. It will go down in history, my boy, and for that alone, I must commend you.*

*Poor Miss Worsley. I will do my best for her, but I will admit she is seemingly undesirous of my attention and support, which I suppose is to be expected.*

*You are my godson, and so I stand by you. I think I would have done so anyway, in all truth, for I am thrilled that for once, you have managed to make a good decision and all on your own without any of my interference (more or less).*

*Elizabeth Howard, while she may not bear that name for much longer, is a good woman. I like her. I could have told you that in the first place if your knucklehead had managed to think of speaking about her to me. You could have saved yourself a great deal of trouble, and I think, if Mr. Worsley has his way, expense if you had made a clean breast of it to me.*

*That is neither here nor there. You’ll wed Mrs. Howard soon, I hope, so that all these intriguing rumors about her and the child can be put to rest. You must all three come to visit me at Romeril Manor when you have returned from your wedding tour.*

*I look forward to knowing your bride better, and the little one who, to my mind, is the spitting image of you at that age. All that*



*blonde hair! Such a shame it darkened over time.*

*I will say no more about it and remain your affectionate godmother,  
Lady Elizabeth Romeril*

It was impossible not to smile at a missive such as that. *Well, Lady Romeril approved of her, did she?* Elizabeth was unsure whether to be flattered or concerned.

“See? I told you she was a good sort,” said Jacob as he dropped down beside her, their son set on a far more favorable path away from e sticks. “Lady Romeril almost says she approves of you, which is high praise indeed.”

Elizabeth laughed. “Yes, and what’s more, her strange behavior—and yours!—makes far more sense now you have explained about that codicil. I just cannot understand why you did not mention it to begin with!”

Jacob looked uncomfortable. “Well, you know. It hardly painted me in a good light, did it? The whole damned situation.”

It was impossible to be angry at him, not now it was all resolved between them—but of course, it could have been so different. *They could have lost each other forever.*

“Tis kind of her to invite us to visit,” she said lightly, folding up the letter and returning it to him.

Jacob rolled his eyes. “Only so she can examine Beau and see whether she can spot any additional similarities between us as children. I had no idea I had blonde hair as a baby. Thank goodness *that* is not common knowledge!”

Elizabeth laughed and looked at their crawling son. *Yes, their secret had been protected by Beau’s blonde hair, so like her own.* Little had they known Beau actually took after his father after all.

“She is absolutely right in her guess, of course, but we do not have to tell her that,” Jacob said blithely. “I wonder how many other people will guess in time.”

Elizabeth bit her lip. It was a question that had occurred to her over the last few days, but hopefully, in the next few years, it would not matter.

Elmore Lenskeyn Beauvale Howard might be the heir to the earldom at the moment, but Albemarle and Theodosia were likely to have more children if the way he looked at his wife was any indication.

“All these invitations,” sighed Jacob heavily. “I hope you realize that is the fourth one, and we only arrived here yesterday! Marnmouth,

Mercia, Axwick, and now Lady Romeril!"

"One cannot help but be popular, it seems," Elizabeth teased him.

He cast her a knowing look. "You know they only want to gawp at us. Well, not the Mercias. I thought I had said goodbye to polite society after my antics in the church, but I have only become more fashionable! How does jilting a woman improve one's reputation?"

"Just think of all the young ladies who will wish to make your acquaintance," said Elizabeth, her eyes dancing. "I hope you will be able to find time in your life and room in your heart for all of them."

*What a relief she could jest like this with the man she loved!* Elmore had never understood jokes. She had lived a life without laughter.

"No, thank you. I have learned my lesson with you and Sophia. No more ladies for me, thank you!"

Beau was crawling toward them now, his eyes bright and a wide grin on his face.

"I suppose that means there is no more room in your heart to love another?" Elizabeth said lightly.

Jacob shook his head. "No fear. I only have room for yourself and Beau. That is all."

Elizabeth smiled. *How she loved teasing him.* "Well, that settles it. I hereby end our engagement."

Little Beau squealed with delight as he spotted a fluffy-tailed rabbit that had just hopped out of a hole. His crawling increased in speed dramatically as he bumbled after it.

After rising to his feet and bringing their son back to the blanket to ensure Beau was perfectly safe, Jacob turned to her. "How—how can you say that? You are teasing me—you cannot be in earnest? Break our engagement?"

Elizabeth forced her face to remain serious. "I am in earnest. If you tell me you only have room in your heart for myself and Beau, I must leave you."

"But—but..." Jacob stared in abject confusion. "After all we have been through, after my own foolishness, which I totally accept responsibility for, how can you think we shouldn't be together?"

Elizabeth did not reply immediately. She looked around her, eyes taking in the sights of Loch Lenskeyn. *This was a beautiful place.* Theodosia had been right in her letter. She had needed to get away from it all, from Bath, from the people who watched and judged and had no idea of her story.

It was most kind of them to offer the seat of the Lenskeyn name for a

week, but she had never felt at home in the Howard family, and now, in a way, she was going to leave it.

This visit to Scotland was her saying goodbye. She had no ties to the Howard name now, other than her growing friendship with Theodosia. Her son was all Beauvale.

"I-I do not know what to say," Jacob said, and Elizabeth looked at him. "Tell me what I have done wrong!"

Elizabeth smiled. "You said yourself, you have no room for anyone else, and I would hate for our second child to be without its father."

*There. It was done.*

Jacob evidently had not understood. "Second...second child?"

Elizabeth nodded, unable to stop smiling. She had not believed it herself at first.

"No. No, you are not," whispered Jacob.

She laughed. "I am! After all those years thinking I was barren, you have managed to make me pregnant again. That is two within two years!"

Utter incomprehension painted Jacob's features as he stared in silence. A small prickle of concern crept around Elizabeth's heart. *What if Jacob had not been jesting—what if he really did not wish to have any more children?*

Then he swept her up into her arms, pulling her down onto the blanket, and was laughing and shouting, and his words mingled into each other as he kissed her again and again.

"A baby!" he was saying in between his laughter and kisses. "Another—oh, Lizzy, you make me so happy! Another little Beauvale!"

Elizabeth was in ecstasy. It was precisely the reaction she had needed, and lying here in his arms in the sunshine with their boy by their side.

"The first official one," she said with a wry smile.

Jacob kissed her. "The first of many."



## Epilogue

Jacob smiled as he allowed his valet to pull his shirt on. “Do not fret yourself, Penrose. I am absolutely sure this time that I will need it.”

His valet smiled as he buttoned up the shirt and adjusted it slightly on Jacob’s shoulders. “Far be it from me to tell you what you do or do not need, my lord, but if you forgive me for saying so, this is a shirt destined for a wedding. Please be careful with it.”

Jacob swallowed down a smile. “I really am getting married today, Penrose.”

Brushing a hint of dust from his shoulder, Penrose helped him into his coat and started to fuss over his cravat.

“I believe you, my lord,” said the valet seriously, “though I must admit, thousands wouldn’t.”

William roared with laughter, seated beside Jacob and already dressed to the nines. “He has the measure of you, Westray, and no mistake!”

Jacob grinned, too. *Nothing would be able to dampen his spirits. Not today.*

“Well, I am nothing if not inconsistent,” he quipped.

William’s smile vanished. “Now hear my words, Westray, and pay heed to them. I do not have to worry about chaining you to the church this time, do I?”

Jacob looked at his reflection and saw a man who looked utterly different from the last time he examined himself on his wedding day.

“No,” he said. “No, this is the woman I am devoted to. No cold feet. Not this time.”

After prevaricating for so long, unable to see a way out that retained both their reputations and his fortune, he had waved goodbye to proprietary and trodden his own path. And now, thanks to Lady Romeril’s unpredictable nature, he had secured his fortune to boot.

“Good,” said William firmly. “Because we need to get moving, you have spent far too long at your coiffure if you ask me. No offense meant, of course, Mr. Penrose.”

The valet bowed his head though only, Jacob was sure, because William was a duke.

"The world expects the bride to be late," William said, standing up and straightening his coat and cravat. "But 'tis rather disgraceful if the groom is. Come on."

The sun was once again shining, as it had been two weeks ago, as Jacob and William began the short walk to the church.

"I warn you now, it is not so good a turn out as...well, the last time," said his best man ruefully.

Jacob almost laughed. *What did it matter to him?*

"I could not care less," he said aloud as they turned the corner and saw the spire of the church. "As long as Elizabeth turns up, the wedding will be perfect."

"You—you do not think there is a chance she could jilt you?" William's voice was full of concern, and his eyes were wide as they reached the church door.

Jacob did laugh this time. "You know what I mean. Come on, let's get this done."

William had been right. The church was almost empty as he walked in, his footsteps echoing uncomfortably loud. There was one elderly lady, however, who had seated herself firmly in the front pew.

*Of course. Lady Romeril.*

"Hallo, godmother," he said with a cheerful tone as he approached her.

Lady Romeril offered him her hand, which he kissed. "Jacob."

"Ready for round two?"

"You really are a most disagreeable boy," she said stiffly, but there was a hint of a smile on her face. "If only you had bothered to listen to me and listened to your heart in the first place, we would not be having a second round. *Really!*"

Jacob grinned. Nothing could dismay him today. This day was going to be perfect. *Why, he could not think of anything—*

As he looked up to see who had just entered the church, Jacob's mouth went dry.

Miss Sophia Worsley was wearing a demure yet fashionable gown and a bonnet of dyed blue straw. She was looking around the church with a vaguely interested expression, and as her gaze fell on him, she smiled.

Jacob forced down the panic and tried to think. *What was she doing here? Here of all places!* She had not been invited; there had been no

communication with the Worsleys other than Lady Romeril promising them he would pay all the bills incurred for the wedding.

*But here she was.*

It was as though he had slipped through time and was reliving it all again—though thankfully, Sophia had not been so rebellious as to turn up today in her wedding gown.

“Ah,” said William behind him, rather uncomfortably. “Right. Yes. Give me one minute, Westray, and I will have her headed off in two tickets.”

The Duke of Mercia strode down the aisle with purpose, and Jacob found, to his shame, he was rather relieved. *This was not a day for speaking with Sophia. Of all days, not today.*

Instead, he turned to the front of the church—the altar where he and Elizabeth would receive their first Communion as husband and wife.

*His wife.* After all his fears of losing her and Beau, they were going to be a family. A real family. She would be Lady Westray, and the child she was carrying would be the first Beauvale born in a generation.

“You always manage to attract drama,” said William with a smile as he returned to the groom’s side.

“What?” protested Jacob. “I say, that is hardly fair!”

His best man grinned. “So ignoring the fact that your first betrothed, a woman you were supposed to be marrying here just fourteen days ago, has turned up unannounced at your wedding to a second woman and will not leave. Shall we also talk about the fact you are marrying a widow? A widow with a child?”

Jacob swallowed. “Well, when you put it like that—”

“A child, and I say this quietly for fear of being overheard,” said William, taking a step toward him to keep his voice low, “a child who looks remarkably like his mother, which you should be eternally grateful for?”

*It was not possible. Who could have told him?*

“How do you know?”

A wide grin spread across William’s face. “I didn’t. You just told me.”

Jacob heaved a heavy sigh. “I have *got* to stop doing that!”

William was laughing as the organ music started.

“Seriously, Mercia,” whispered Jacob as they took their places at the front of the church. “How did you know?”

His best man shrugged. “’Tis just the way you look at him. The way you look at—”

“Elizabeth,” breathed Jacob.

*There she was.* After what felt like forever, there she was. His bride.

Elizabeth stood alone in the doorway. No father was there to take her arm as she walked slowly and elegantly by herself.

She had been right. Beau could not yet walk, and he gurgled happily in the arms of Lady Romeril.

The rest of the world melted away as Jacob watched her come toward him. Before he had realized what was happening, she had reached him and taken his hand.

"Please be seated," said the vicar.

Jacob jumped. He had hardly noticed the older man approach, and there was a look of cold steel in his eyes.

"No wandering off today, I trust?"

Feeling abashed, Jacob shook his head. "No, your reverend."

Elizabeth giggled, which he felt was uncalled for.

"You...you look beautiful," he whispered as the vicar started his opening welcome.

"Thank you," said Elizabeth, blushing prettily. "Not...not too widowlike?"

Jacob could not help himself. "I'm sorry, you were married before?"

Her smile broadened, and she was about to say something, but she was interrupted by the vicar, who frowned.

"I said," he repeated rather severely, "if anyone can show just cause why this couple cannot lawfully be joined together in matrimony, let them speak now or forever hold their peace."

Jacob could not help it. Despite everything in him screaming at him not to do so, he tilted his head ever so slightly and looked at Sophia.

There she was, seated right beside Lady Romeril. The younger woman opened her mouth, but before she could say a word, his godmother gave the most almighty sneeze.

"I do apologize, reverend," she said with a smile as Beau looked at her with wide-eyed shock. "Please, continue."

"Right," said the vicar, obviously a little thrown. "Right. Do you, Elizabeth Victoria Howard..."

Lady Romeril winked at her godson, who almost laughed aloud. *Even at the last hurdle, his unusual yet dependable godmother was there to help him across the finishing line!*

In later years, Jacob would never be able to recount what followed in much detail. It whirled by in a flurry of vows, of kisses under the church doorway, and before he knew it, he and Elizabeth, his wife, his very own Lady Westray, was by his side at Lenskeyn House.

"I still do not understand why I could not have hosted the wedding reception," he had murmured to her as they entered the hallway. "You are *my wife*, after all. A Beauvale."

Elizabeth smiled. "Albemarle insisted on hosting, as you well know. I think he wishes to make up for his mother's...let us say, *unhappiness* at my being married so soon."

"Well," said Jacob in a whisper as guests approached to congratulate them, "this is the last time you will need to worry about the Howard family."

Elizabeth squeezed his hand. "Well, I do not mind Theodosia and Albemarle so much. They have been good to me, and I would like Beau to continue seeing them, and little Mina, too, I suppose. It is just...being here, where I celebrated my first wedding...it is painful."

It cost her to admit those words, Jacob could see that. No bride wished to refer to previous unhappiness on her wedding day, but she was always so open with him, so honest.

He wished desperately to kiss away that pain. *Later, perhaps.*

"You can forget all about him now," he said instead as the head of the Howard family approached them.

"Congratulations are in order," said Albemarle, thrusting out his hand for Jacob to shake. "And I hope, in some strange way, you can consider us family, Theodosia and Mina and me."

Jacob glanced at Elizabeth before he said, "Of course, I would be honored. Though I may, if I may beg your pardon, forgo the pleasure of seeing your mother so frequently."

The Earl of Lenskeyn roared with laughter. "You may, sir, and I wish I could do the same! Now, let me see where that scamp of a wife of mine has got to—she's struggled to leave matchmaking behind, and if I leave her alone too long, she'll have married off half your guests!"

He strode away as Elizabeth laughed. "The more I know of Theodosia, the more I like her."

A footman approached with a small wooden box, and Jacob smiled. "Ah, thank you."

He saw Elizabeth look at it curiously, and he forced down his excitement. It had not exactly been long in the planning, but this could be one of the best gifts he would ever give.

"This," he said softly, "is for you."

Elizabeth took the box and opened it slowly, eyes widening as she saw what was inside. "You...what have you done?"

Inside the box were the Lenskeyn jewels."



“I pawned almost all of these away,” she hissed, looking around to ensure Albemarle was out of earshot. “Jacob, have you...have you stolen these from the Howards?”

Jacob laughed. “Gracious no, I am hardly a blaggard and a thief! No, I instructed a man I knew to...shall we say, collect the pawned genuine articles from the many men you were forced to give them to.”

His words had not calmed his wife’s expression. “But...but these are the real jewels of Lenskeyn, and Theodosia has the replicas!”

Jacob shook his head. It really was a perfect plan. “One would think so, except that I have paid a small fortune to one of the footmen here and swapped the boxes around. Theodosia now has the real jewels, not that she will ever know they were missing, and you have a box of very lovely glass.”

As his words sank in, Elizabeth started to laugh. “You know, I can never say my life has been dull,” she said ruefully. “Why, for a moment there in the church when I saw...”

“Don’t say a word,” Jacob said, kissing her neck, then her lips. “Everything is perfect now. And I will love you forever.”

“Forever,” Elizabeth said, and Jacob knew his happiness was complete.

## About Emily E K Murdoch

If you love falling in love, then you've come to the right place.

I am a historian and writer and have a varied career to date: from examining medieval manuscripts to designing museum exhibitions, to working as a researcher for the BBC to working for the National Trust.

My books range from England 1050 to Texas 1848, and I can't wait for you to fall in love with my heroes and heroines!

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